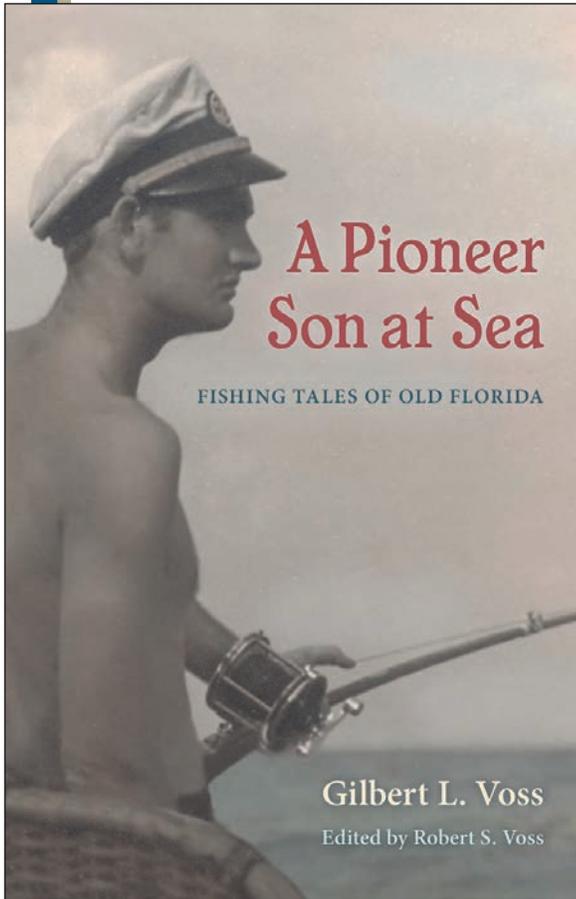


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A PIONEER SON AT SEA
Fishing Tales of Old Florida

GILBERT L. VOSS, EDITED BY ROBERT S. VOSS

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Gilbert Voss

GILBERT VOSS (1918–1989) was born to pioneer parents in Hypoluxo, Florida, and spent much of his early life as a commercial fisherman and charterboatman. After service in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II, he attended the University of Miami and George Washington University, where he got his PhD in 1956. A marine biologist, he worked and taught for many years at the Marine Laboratory of the University of Miami (now the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science) on Virginia Key. Author of numerous scientific and popular articles on marine life, fishing, and the history of oceanography, he was also active as a conservationist and was an early proponent of the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park on Key Largo.

ROBERT S. VOSS, the author's son, grew up in Miami but now lives with his family in Tenafly, New Jersey. He is a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, where his research is focused on the evolution and ecology of South American mammals.

ROBERT S. VOSS
is available for interviews.



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Q&A with Robert S. Voss

editor of Gilbert L. Voss's
A Pioneer Son at Sea

When did you decide to try to have your father's narrative published?

We tried to find a publisher about 25 years ago, but we were unsuccessful. I guess too many of the "greatest generation" were still around back then, and folks didn't realize how remarkable their experiences really were. Now that they're almost all gone, we're scrambling to preserve their voices.

What was it like to see the world from your father's perspective while editing his original typescript?

It was a really different world back then. So much simpler in many ways (I really envy that), but harder in others. Commercial fishing was a tough way to earn a living.

How did working on his book help you learn more about your father?

It filled in a lot of gaps in my understanding of his early life, especially what it was like growing up in the Depression.

Did you learn anything new about your family?

Oh, lots. I knew the broad outlines of our family history, but not how close my father was to his brothers, or how much they worked together as teenagers and young men before the war.

What is your favorite memory of your father?

Sailing in the Bahamas on a family vacation when I was 17. We'd never gone sailing as a family before; I'd never even been on a sailboat. We left Hopetown Harbor under power and then he cut the engine and we . . . sailed. There was a stiff breeze and the lee rail was almost in the water. I was terrified, but he was like, "No big deal."

Do you think the sort of naturalist Gilbert Voss was—a fisherman and a conservationist—is a dying breed?

Naturalists are a dying breed, for sure. Natural habitats are so much less accessible to kids today than they were even 50 years ago, and kids' lives are now so sheltered and overscheduled. Deep first-hand learning about nature takes lots of unstructured time. When was the last time any kids in your family wandered off in the woods by themselves or took a boat out on their own, for hours and hours? Kids used to do that all the time, or they could if they wanted to. Not anymore.

The book is dedicated to your sons, who never met Gil. What do they think of his narrative?

My oldest son read parts of the manuscript a couple of years ago and loved it. My youngest is waiting impatiently for the book to appear and will probably take it to bed with him. I'm sure he'll like it.

What do you hope readers will enjoy the most about this book?

I hope they'll enjoy learning what Florida used to be like, for those who once lived along its unspoiled coasts. It's kind of hard now to imagine just how important commercial fishing used to be in the state and how closely folks were engaged with marine habitats in meaningful ways. It's a vanishing way of life, but one worth remembering and preserving where it still survives.

Foreword

My father, Gilbert L. Voss (“Gil” to family and friends), was a marine biologist and conservationist who worked and taught for many years at the Marine Laboratory of the University of Miami on Virginia Key. An internationally recognized specialist on cephalopods—octopus, cuttlefish, and squid—he also directed the University of Miami’s ambitious deep-sea trawling program in the 1960s, served as chief scientist on numerous oceanographic cruises, edited the *Bulletin of Marine Science*, and established the laboratory’s renowned marine invertebrate museum. Alarmed by the deteriorating condition of south Florida’s coral reefs, he was active in local conservation movements, and he was one of the chief proponents of the John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the first undersea park in the United States. Over the course of his professional career he published well over a hundred scientific reports as well as several popular books on oceanography, seashore life, and coral reefs. Many of the doctoral students he mentored went on to become influential marine biologists at universities, museums, and laboratories across the country and abroad.

Key to Gil’s effectiveness in many aspects of his professional career were deep family roots in Florida history; a lifelong familiarity with both the seashore and the open ocean; an intimate knowledge of ships, engines, nets, and other marine hardware; and an enduring affection for fishermen and their ways. Few who knew him only as a researcher, fellow committee member,

or classroom lecturer—usually dressed, like most scientists of his generation, in a coat and tie—were fully aware of his non-academic background, nor did they know that science was a late calling. Born to pioneer parents on Lake Worth, Gil grew to manhood during the Depression, fishing the rich waters of the state, which then teemed with marine life. After four years in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II, he fished again for a while with his brothers before deciding to go back to school on the G.I. Bill. Gil had always wanted to write and intended to become a professional author, but the fisherman-writer was captivated by an introductory zoology course at the University of Miami and began a long career in biological oceanography instead.

Late in life Gil completed a memoir of his early experiences fishing in Florida. Set in the 1930s and 1940s, these stories vividly re-create his years as a fisherman and as a coastguardsman working among fishermen on both coasts of the peninsula. His accounts depict vanished scenes almost unimaginable to modern residents of the state. Long before the plague of hotels, condominiums, and strip malls that now disfigure so much of our coastline, Florida was home to dozens of commercial fisheries and to ethnically diverse communities of rugged individuals who made their living from the sea. Few now remember this rich fabric of indigenous Florida lifeways, which were once a vital part of the state's economy.

At various times in his early days Gil netted for mackerel, handlined for kingfish, tied up alongside the rowdy-crewed snapper fleet at Carrabelle, mated for his brothers in the early days of charterboat fishing, made friends among the sponge divers at Tarpon Springs, placated angry oystermen at Crystal River, and fished for mullet from airboats at Flamingo. Outsized personalities inhabit these stories: crackers, Greek spongers, Cuban *vivero* captains, conchs, and a host of minor but unforgettable characters. These were men who once went down to the sea in ships, and the sea supported them.

These stories make good reading, but they are also remarkable as formative chapters in the life of a scientist who later made a difference, working tirelessly to preserve south Florida's endangered marine habitats. Is there a connection? Many prominent naturalists and conservationists of the twentieth century grew up fishing, hunting, trapping, or collecting. Although such activities may seem exploitative to armchair environmentalists, subsistence-level involvement with nature yields deep knowledge of how organisms live and ecosystems function. Can such fertile life experiences be sustained in an increasingly virtual world? Can anyone better defend the oceans than those who once wrested a living from the waves?

Gil's maternal grandfather, Hannibal Dillingham Pierce, was something of an adventurer, and it is a minor miracle that he survived to raise a family on the southeast coast of Florida. Born in Maine in 1834, Hannibal ran away to sea at sixteen and, among other escapades, went whaling in the Arctic Ocean, prospected for gold in Australia, and was shipwrecked at least twice, the last time on a schooner that foundered in a violent storm on the western shore of Lake Michigan. Taken in for the winter by the hospitable Moore family of Waukegan, Illinois, Hannibal married their daughter Margretta the following spring, in 1857. Although three little girls were born to the young couple over the next several years, all died of diphtheria as infants or toddlers. In 1863 Hannibal joined the 17th Illinois Cavalry, in which he served, together with his brother-in-law William Moore, during the last years of the Civil War.

Hannibal and Margretta moved to Chicago after the war ended. Having already lost three children, they must have feared for the health of their fourth—a boy, Charles, born in 1864. Large northern cities were not healthy places in those days of epidemic disease, and Uncle Will—who had once lived near

Jacksonville while recuperating from a bout of tuberculosis—eventually persuaded them to move again, this time to Florida. A 28-foot sloop, the FAIRY BELLE, was purchased, refurbished, and outfitted for the trip. Tragedy was averted when the ship narrowly escaped incineration in the great Chicago fire of 1871, but the warehoused sails, spars, and rigging were destroyed. As soon as these could be replaced, the family and Uncle Will left the devastated city and set off down the Illinois River, bound for the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

After numerous adventures and mishaps the FAIRY BELLE made landfall on the west coast of Florida at Cedar Key in the summer of 1872. Warned by the locals not to sail south around the peninsula during hurricane season, the family sold the ship and crossed to the east coast on the recently completed Florida Railroad, settling first at Ankona Heights on Indian River, next at Jupiter, and finally (more or less permanently) on Lake Worth in 1873. Wittingly or no, they had arrived in what was perhaps the last extensive wilderness in the eastern United States.

Between Jupiter Inlet and the mouth of the Miami River, a distance of some eighty miles, not a single permanent settlement could be found anywhere along the ocean beach in the early 1870s. No desert island was lonelier, the coastline an unrelieved prospect of sand and dune vegetation as far as the eye could see. The pine flatwoods and swamps behind the beach, however, were favorite hunting grounds of the Seminoles, with whom the United States Army had fought a series of inconclusive wars, the last of which ended only fifteen years before the Pierces arrived on the lake. Although Hannibal liked the Indians and eventually came to trust them, Seminole hunting parties were prone to turn up unannounced at any time, causing nervousness among the women and children when the menfolk were away.

The lake itself was almost uninhabited, with but a single per-

manent resident in 1873. Twenty-one miles long and no more than a mile across at its widest point, it extended parallel to the coast and was only separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a narrow barrier beach. When the first settlers arrived, it was a pristine freshwater lake, fed by seepage from the eastern Everglades, just a few miles to the west. The Pierces settled on a large island near the south end of the lake, close to the portage (locally known as a “haulover”) where small craft could be dragged across the sandy spit between lake and ocean. The settlers called it Hypoluxo Island, after the Seminole name for the lake itself.

Needless to say, pioneer life was difficult at first. Clouds of mosquitoes plagued the settlers in the summertime, and the dense subtropical jungle had to be cleared by hand for house construction and to plant crops. Fish and game were abundant, but cash to purchase powder and shot, tools, crockery, cloth, and other necessary manufactured items was in desperately short supply. Fortunately, some necessities, and a few creature comforts as well, came from the sea.

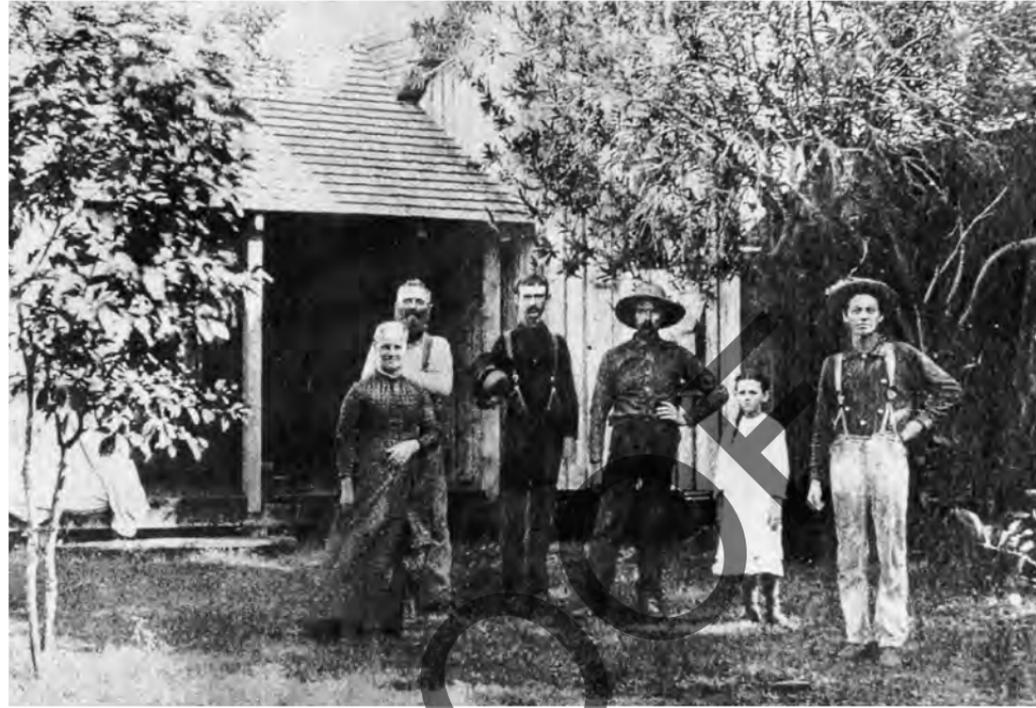
For the southeast Florida coast was a veritable graveyard of shipping. Southbound vessels headed for Key West, New Orleans, and the Gulf of Mexico sailed as close to the coast as possible to avoid the contrary northward current of the Gulf Stream. Without any lighthouse between Jupiter and Cape Florida, shipwrecks were commonplace events in the early 1870s, and quantities of lumber and cargo washed up on the beach as the wrecks broke up off shore. In fact, the Pierce house was built almost entirely from flotsam: the corner posts of heavy ship’s timbers, the siding and floors from ship’s planking. Many other useful items were also found along the ocean beach, remnants of ships wrecked in the hurricane of 1870, including scraps of brass and copper scavenged by young Charles (now a sturdy boy), which he sold to a shopkeeper in Titusville—160 miles away to the north—for pocket money.

Transportation was simple for the early pioneers: either you

sailed or you walked. Even small children learned to handle boats competently on the lake, and boys at a surprisingly early age were entrusted with ferrying women, younger children, and cargo up and down the coast as needed. However, shank's mare was the only alternative when the wind was unfavorable, and settlers occasionally walked the beach from Lake Worth all the way to Miami, a distance of some sixty miles. Later the mail was carried by foot along the same stretch of coast by the legendary barefoot mailmen.

Shortly after the crew of a vessel wrecked in the hurricane of 1873 almost starved to death on the beach between New River and Biscayne Bay, the United States Life Saving Service began construction of five "houses of refuge," where shipwrecked sailors on Florida's east coast could at least be assured of shelter, food, and clothing. One of these, the Orange Grove House of Refuge, was sited just south of Lake Worth, and Hannibal was hired as its first keeper. Here it was that Gil's mother, Lillie Pierce, was born in 1876, but the family did not stay long. Margretta missed their house on the lake, so the family returned to Hypoluxo Island in 1877. Except for a brief episode when Hannibal was hired as keeper of the Biscayne Bay House of Refuge in 1882, they did not leave the lake again. Hannibal had finally settled down.

Life in the wilds of Florida was primitive in some respects, but the settlers were not illiterate, and their children did not grow up as uneducated savages. Margretta Pierce had been a schoolteacher back in Illinois, and she took pains with Charles' and Lillie's lessons; in today's parlance, they were home-schooled. Hannibal himself appears to have been a prolific letter writer, and his family in Maine dispatched regular packages of books and magazines that traveled down the coast by steamship and sailing skiff to the lake.¹ One imagines that these packages were eagerly anticipated, each book and magazine read with close attention, and their contents discussed after supper as adults rocked in the lamplight and children sat about on the



The Pierce homestead on Hypoluxo Island. *Left to right:* Margretta Pierce, Hannibal Pierce, Andrew Garnett (a neighbor), Ed Hamilton (another neighbor), Lillie Pierce (Gil's mother), and Charles Pierce (Uncle Charlie). Photographer unknown, ca. 1886.

ship-planked floors. Both Charles and Lillie grew up to be voracious readers and compulsive diarists, traits that were passed along to nephew and son long decades later.

Lacking playmates for much of her youth, Lillie grew up to be tough and self-reliant, learned to sail and shoot like a boy, and had many childhood adventures on the sea beach and the lake. Later, as one of the few marriageable young women in the region, she attracted much male attention. Among her admirers was one Frederick C. Voss, a steam engineer born in Maine to Danish immigrant parents. Fred first came to Lake Worth in 1888 and must have met Lillie when she was just a girl. The two were married in 1894, when Lillie was eighteen and Fred twenty-nine.