

## “When the Groves Begin to Bear”

There’s a phrase we heard so often  
 In the days not long ago;  
 And the word—as always—soften;—  
 Bring the ache such mem’ries know;  
 I can hear my father’s saying  
 “When the groves begin to bear.”

George E. Merrick, “When the Groves Begin to Bear”

The train trip from Baltimore to South Florida took two days and was tedious. But despite the incessant stops and frequent change of trains, George could not help but see the journey as a *Swiss Family Robinson* adventure. His romantic mind imagined South Florida to be like the Robinson’s tropic isle. Surely, the Massachusetts Family Merrick’s adventure would end as happily. His father, on the other hand, viewed the move like he viewed life. It was neither romantic nor exciting but simply necessary. He stoically faced the future with clenched teeth and his usual no-nonsense resolve.

George was thirteen and just beginning the tumultuous rush to manhood. He relished the opportunity to spend time alone, man-to-man, with his usually distant father. But even George would have felt despair had he known what awaited him in Florida. His childhood was whizzing by as fast as the strange scenery he saw from the open window. Within days, he would take on the work of a man and face adult responsibilities beyond those experienced by his favorite Dickens characters.

If Solomon, who, unlike George, always saw the glass half empty, had known what lay ahead, he would have been more depressed than usual.

At some point during the trip, he heard the shocking news that yellow fever had broken out in Miami and the young city was quarantined. Now, with no way to turn back, they faced not only an unknown place but also a deadly tropical scourge that was worse than anything they had experienced in the frozen north. Because of the quarantine, George later wrote, the train could not continue on to Miami, so a sympathetic minister who lived near Florida's Loxahatchee River offered him and his father a place to stay. Their sojourn was brief; by early November, just two months after they left Baltimore, *The Miami Metropolis* recorded the Merricks among the newcomers.<sup>1</sup> George and his father had skirted the city's quarantine by sailing into Coconut Grove, which was actually closer to their final destination than the Miami depot was.



When George and Solomon arrived in Coconut Grove they felt encouraged. It was a small but thriving sailing community with large bayfront homes, lush landscaping, and an air of quiet sophistication. As they walked down the wooden wharf that jugged out into the bay from the foot of today's MacFarlane Road, they could see the rather imposing Peacock Inn, South Florida's first hotel, sitting proudly on the ridge to their left. It was owned and operated by Englishman Charles Peacock and his wife, Isabella. On the right, across the narrow roadway of glaring-white crushed rock, stood the Peacock and Son General Store and the newly completed, picturesque Union Congregational Church. The Coconut Grove schoolhouse and the Housekeepers Club—South Florida's first woman's club—were visible behind the church. In many ways, smaller but older Coconut Grove was far ahead of Miami. Besides a school, church, and woman's club, it had a library and yacht club and an impressive group of regular winter visitors and permanent residents. Kirk Munroe, a nationally known author of boys' adventure books, had a home there. George, of course, had read every one of Munroe's books, including several with Florida themes.

Down the bayfront on the road to Miami was a row of large, Key West-style homes. One belonged to the Albury family, whose daughter Sarah Louise married William Gregory. She, according to the old-timers, was the reason Gregory sold Merrick the homestead. Before long, Charles Peacock's son Alfred, who ran the general store, would own this house. There,



Eunice, his four-year-old daughter, would grow up and one day marry George Merrick.

Rev. James Bolton, the red-haired preacher who arranged for Merrick's purchase of the Gregory homestead, met Solomon and George at the boat. Bolton offered them a place to stay until they had the homestead ready for the family. Bolton was English and his young wife, Eva, who suffered from consumption, came from an aristocratic Kentucky family. A Methodist minister by training, he had served a number of Florida churches, including the one in Key West. The Boltons were true pioneers, having arrived in Miami in 1896. He preached in the fledgling settlement's first tent-church and witnessed the birth of the new city. The following year, he moved to Coconut Grove and became the first permanent minister of the established Union Chapel, which had recently officially connected to the Congregational Church.

The Boltons lived on a ten-acre tract on the southwest corner of the intersection of today's Grand Avenue and Douglas Road. Called "Minnewanda Lodge," locals considered it one of the prettiest homes back of the bayfront. The popular couple was famous for their beautiful roses, tropical trees, and luxuriant vines that spilled over a crude rock wall. "The scene," *The Miami Metropolis* opined, "had a New England air."<sup>2</sup> Here, George met the tropics and tasted his first exotic fruits—mangoes, avocados or alligator pears, rose apples, sapodillas, and guavas.

Just to the north was Eva's good friend Flora MacFarlane's homestead. Flora was a woman of many firsts—first woman homesteader, founder and first president of the Housekeepers Club, and one of the first Coconut Grove schoolteachers. Slightly southeast, early resident Joseph Frow had "proved up" another homestead. After he gained title, he moved to the bayfront, platted his homestead, and sold lots to many of the new black Bahamian residents who created a thriving community called Kebo. His daughter Lillian married Alfred Peacock and was the mother of baby Eunice.

George and his father spent their first Miami night in the Boltons' small attic room where, George wrote, they "became acquainted with the night agony of red-bugs, gnats, mosquitoes and jiggers."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this sleepless night was but a prelude to a recurrent bedtime nightmare.

The final lap of their journey from New England to a new life began on what was then called Bolton's Road, now Grand Avenue. As they walked

west, perhaps Solomon was looking forward to finding what his daughter Ethel later said he expected—“a tropical retreat where a family of culture might retire and live a life of more or less leisure as growers of fruits and trees.”<sup>4</sup> These delusions quickly disappeared. Soon after they passed Bolton and MacFarlane’s small clearings, they entered a wild and virgin pine forest. “Deep ruddy holes, barricading palmettos and sandy sinks were the gauntlets,”<sup>5</sup> George wrote.

What was called the Coconut Grove backcountry began just west of today’s Douglas Road. This twenty-square-mile western portion of Township 54S/41E was considered so remote that the government did not get around to surveying it until 1891. Three weeks after it was opened to homesteaders, however, 142 would-be pioneers caught what *The Tropical Sun* called “Miami Fever” and filed claims.<sup>6</sup> The homesteaders, who were mostly young, male, Southern, and single, found the government’s offer irresistible. If a person lived on the land for five years, built a house, and raised some crops, he or she could acquire a 160-acre square for only a small filing fee of about fourteen dollars. After fulfilling their obligation and receiving a patent or deed, many homesteaders, like William Gregory, sold the land and returned to their former homes with cash in hand.

Because the land available for homesteading had to be high and dry, it included vast expanses of rocky, palmetto-choked pineland. The locals called these high rocky ridges “reefs” and the intermittent sandy and sometimes seasonally soggy areas “glades” or “sinks.” Homesteaders wanted some glade or prairie land in their tract because it did not require clearing. The glades’ soil was good for raising vegetables—especially winter vegetables that grew to maturity before the summer rains. The rocky pinewood, although looking rather hopeless for raising anything, proved to be good for citrus—if someone was willing to put in the sweat and tears necessary to clear it.

When George and his father reached what is today’s LeJeune Road, they turned right and passed by five more one-quarter-mile-square homesteads—Obenchain, Richardson, Kelly, Thompson, and Jackson—before turning left on Jackson Road, now Coral Way. To the north of what was hardly a road and barely a trail, “Red” McAllister’s log cabin and clearing marked another homestead. (One day, George would own them all.)

The weary newcomers finally reached a stake at the intersection of what