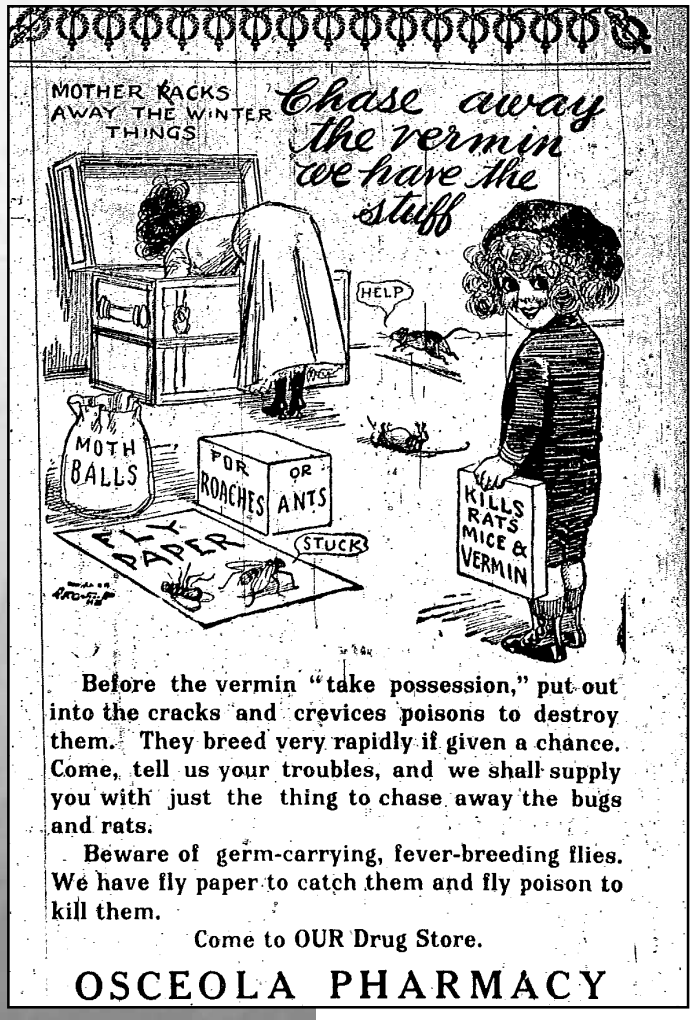
Getting the Bugs Out:

Fort Lauderdale before pest control

By Susan Gillis



Advertisement from the Fort Lauderdale Sentinel *of 1913 (Broward County Historical Commission collection)*

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To those full time residents who wonder "how people down here survived before air-conditioning," in the summer months, I say your misery is nothing to that suffered by our hardy settlers in the days before DDT. Insects were a constant threat to man and beast throughout the year, but never more so than when the "west wind blew in from the Everglades" as my grandmother would say, during the summer months. The Seminole Indians as well as the early white settlers, found various flying pests to be a continual threat to their crops, livestock, and themselves — malaria was potentially fatal, in the days before quinine. Horseflies were large and fierce, drawing blood from animals and humans alike. Early local pioneers often relied on canned milk and sea turtle eggs because of the difficulty of keeping livestock. When Davie pioneers Blanche and Hamilton Forman struggled to establish dairy farming in the area they faced formidable if small foes. The mosquitoes could be so numerous they were known to have killed unprotected animals left in the open.[1]

These intrepid pioneers were resourceful however; the ancient Tequesta knew to pick up and move camp to a site nearer the ocean breezes during an infestation. The Seminole and other early settlers used smoke from the campfire to fend off flying insects. Current South Florida residents can only imagine how the average lifespan might have been shortened by that practice. They also used mosquito netting or cheesecloth for bedding, in the days before window screens.[2] Pioneers commonly carried a "smudge," which was often palmetto roots set afire with wet grass or wet moss added to create more smoke, and

every home had a palm frond fan at the door that was used to disperse the flying insects lurking there. Indians and early white and black settlers wore long sleeves and dark clothing—even on the hottest day. The alternative to "broiling" was being eaten alive.[3]

The real dread of the pioneer era was a critter called a "no-see-um," or sand fly. The pest was particularly tiny, particularly insidious, and particularly prevalent near the beach, where one might expect to find relief. Fort Lauderdale pioneer Joe Oliver recalled his own early method of integrated pest management:

"Back in the early days and up to and including World War II, up past that time even, we had a thing here called a sand fly. My wife and I, when we were just a young married couple, lived out in a place called Victoria Park…We used to have to take drained out crank case oil and kerosene to paint the screen to keep the sand flies out. The sand flies would fly up against the screens and stick on that oil and then when they would get so thick we would have to take the screens down and wash them off and do the whole job all over again. How those Yankees stood those sand flies and mosquitoes, back in the early days, I'll never know… I will say that was about the worst thing Fort Lauderdale ever had.[4]"

Mercifully, times changed. In the 1930s, Dade and Broward County began an active campaign against the flying pests by digging a series of drainage ditches to drain local marshes where they bred. DDT, a highly effective broad spectrum pesticide developed during World War II, was quickly adopted on the home front after the war. Trucks and airplanes were dispatched to "fog" infested communities through South Florida from the late 1940s until the 1960s. The treatment was immediate and long lasting.[5] But the same factors that made DDT useful caused it to be banned from use in the U.S. by 1972 when it was shown to accumulate in non-target species (all the way up and down the food chain) and have a long-residual life.[6] Other safer and more modern pesticides have taken its place. But the real answer to "getting the bugs out" is much simpler—concrete.

Here workers dig "mosquito ditches" in the central part of Broward County—channels to drain the local marshes where these insects bred—in the mid 1950s. (Image courtesy Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, Gene Hyde Collection)

The vast amount of pavement that has taken over much of Broward County ensures that fewer and fewer flying pests today have a breeding ground.

1 Charles Hofman, *Letters From Linton* (Delray Beach, 2004),69; Victoria Wagner, *The History of Davie and Its Dilemma* (Fort Lauderdale: Nova University, 1982), 27.

2 Patsy West, " Reflections 181: Mosquitoes," TMs Seminole Miccosukee Photo Archives.

3 August Burghard and Philip Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966), 25. Virginia S. Young, *Mangrove Roots of Fort Lauderdale* (Fort Lauderdale, 1976), 18; Wagner, History of Davie, 46.

4 Joe Oliver, Oral History Interview OH95, Fort Lauderdale Historical Society

5 Dan Ray, "Getting the Bugs Out," *Mostly Sunny Days* (Miami: Miami Herald, 1986), 141-145.

6 George W. Ware, *Pesticides Theory and Application* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 36-38.