

# THE FRANK N. CHAPLIN FAMILY: EVERGLADES PIONEERS

Reprinted from

*Elder Asa Chaplin, Revolutionary Soldier, 1739/40-1807*

by Mittie Myers Chaplin

(Miami, The Miami Post Publishing Co., 1956)

Much of Broward County's history is intertwined with the history of the Everglades, which, in its original state, encompassed approximately six-sevenths of the county's area. Although Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's initial efforts to drain this vast watery wilderness, beginning in 1906, resulted in the reclamation of some farmland, chiefly along the major state drainage canals, as well as in a rush of land speculation, and eventually the formation of a new county named for the governor, much of the region remained flooded and unusable at the time Broward County came into being in 1915. During the 1920s, as the Florida land boom focused public attention on Broward County's rapidly growing coastal communities, the establishment of individual drainage districts, the arrival of new agricultural pioneers, and the construction of additional lateral ditches and canals opened vast new acres of mucklands to cultivation.

The Chaplin family was in the forefront of this new era of Everglades agricultural development. Born at Little Mackinac, Illinois, on May 19, 1856, Franklin Nichol

Chaplin grew up on the family farm there, moving with his parents to an eighty-acre farm at Normal, Illinois, in 1873 or 1874. As a young man, he received his certification as a teacher, and taught country schools in Illinois in addition to farming. As his wife, Mittie Myers Chaplin, would write, some eighty years later:

At heart he was a born farmer. He was in advance of his day in that his idea of developing a raw piece of land was not just to rake off what the land freely gave, but to add to its powers of reproduction. One small piece of land he lived on at this period was partially swamp and unproductive. His idea, then far advanced so far as common practice went, was to tile-drain the swamp and so make the whole piece productive. Thus began the philosophy of added usefulness which motivated all his farming operations — to make two blades of grass grow where only one grew before.<sup>1</sup>

In 1882, Frank Chaplin moved to Kansas, where he cultivated a tract of prairie land for several years. In 1890, he moved to California, and there began farming the rich but flood-prone Suisun Bay Delta area northeast of San Francisco. There, Chaplin, his wife, and four children struggled against the elements and the uncertainties of the agricultural market before deciding to seek their fortunes on a new frontier. Their years in California, though financially unsuccessful, provided the family with much of the experience necessary to farm the reclaimed Everglades land in what was then Broward County's westernmost outpost of habitation.

Some of the properties once owned by the Chaplin family include part of today's Tree Tops Park site, where the family had a dairy and later a citrus nursery. The site is part of Pine Island Ridge. To the west, a portion of Long Key Ridge at the south border of the Flamingo Gardens tram route and the western end of Long Key Ridge next to the old Kapok Tree restaurant were also part of the family properties. According to Ruth Faulk, wife of Frank Chaplin's son Charlie, both Charlie and his father had a

"hound dog nose" for high land. Their properties included lands which were indeed the "higher ground" so important for farming in this region.

The following account of the Frank N. Chaplin family's move to south Florida and their contributions to Broward County's history is taken from a 1956 family history written by Mittie Myers Chaplin and reprinted here with the permission of the Chaplin family.

In 1919 father [Frank N. Chaplin] and son [Bert R. Chaplin] gave up the fight and began a search for a purchaser for the island [Van Sickle Island in Solano County, California] and for a new field in which they might make their living and perhaps regain their financial status. At one time



Frank N. Chaplin standing in a field of Napier grass, grown as an experiment on his dairy farm at today's Tree Tops Park, c. 1930s (courtesy of Bonnie Chaplin Scism).

they were offered acreage near Los Angeles in trade for their equity in Van Sickle Island. Time and the unparalleled growth of Los Angeles now reveal the acreage as very valuable suburban property, which subdivided into city lots would have made them whole again financially. But the trade was rejected! It was "too far out" from Los Angeles to be valuable for city property! And it had no great intrinsic value agriculturally. The last, to grower-minded father, was an absolutely conclusive argument. At this low point, Bert unearthed a government bulletin on the Everglades of Florida. This gave analysis of soil which showed a large muck, and therefore nitrogen, content. Bert instantly conceived the plan of recouping his fortunes by developing his nitrogen plant in Florida. His production-minded father immediately saw

possibilities of a cattle empire on the cheap lands of the Everglades.

That year they toured the Southern States in a secondhand "Model T" Ford purchased in New Orleans and sold before they returned to California. In their absence Frank's wife carried on, using Van Sickle Island as a base and home. She taught a country school across the bay at McAvoy in Contra Costa County. A job gives you cash; a farm takes cash! She and the three children came and went each day on the Oakland and Antioch Electric Railroad, each to his respective school in the next county, ten to fifty miles away! The sinking levees of Van Sickle did not hold against the "spring" tides of that autumn, and Mrs. Chaplin had, in the absence of her men, while continuing her teaching, to cope with that winter's flood conditions in the best way altogether limited financial conditions

permitted.

How could she and the three children go back and forth at will during a flood? Why did they not have to be evacuated? The explanation is simple. The island was subject to tidal overflow only, and that only at a very high tide or in high spring-of-the-year flood conditions on the rivers which joined just above it. At low tides the outside waters were from six to eleven feet below the land surface. Parts of the land distant from the river shore were on a slightly higher level and more solid silt ground; the levees here were good, and held; water from breaks in the river-front levees did not always cover the entire island. The farm buildings and the railroad station were on this portion of the island, while the railroad itself was trestled across the island to the ferry on the riverfront. The

original railroad grade thrown up on the peat base had not stood up to the load and had sunk out of site below the island's water level. Hence the trestle. Then too the flood was not an onrushing river current maintaining the same height and current for days and days. It was a creeping tide that crept in, and then most of it crept out each day for day after day on that treacherous mile of river front levee, in a sort of Flanagan's "on-again-off-again" performance of nature. People could ride it out in their houses on higher ground or at above basement level for a few hours until the tide went down, or even for a day or two if the tide was an unusual one. Crops were different. Without complete control by stable levees around the entire island crops could not be grown, and cattle grazing was limited.

The recent last word on this swamp delta land, so potentially rich in its agricultural possibilities, is that the few remaining inhabitants have been put on notice to abandon their lands, "at a price agreed upon." The Department of Defense will use the lands, so goes the rumor, for a "super ammunition dump," the largest in the world — for hydrogen bombs, atomic bombs, and whatever else is to be dreamed up in the way of defense ammunition. It would be an ideal spot for such an installation for several reasons. Perhaps these lands, too difficult to reclaim for agriculture, have at last found their niche of usefulness in the realm of twentieth century defense!

The tour of the South pinned the family agricultural and real estate hopes to another star — the vast undeveloped region of the Everglades, a last great pioneer agricultural front in the United States, strangely enough in the first settled state in the Union. Later that year [1919] Bert Chaplin and his wife moved to Miami, Florida, fully expecting to develop his process of extracting nitrogen from the muck of the Everglades. His father and family followed in September, 1922. Always forward looking and optimistic, Frank was sure he would make himself the exception to disprove the economic rule that a financial "comeback" is impossible to a man of sixty. His three young children were inspired in bedtime story with an imaginative picture of a great cattle ranch in the Everglades with all the ponies and accompanying glamor of a distant cattle barony in Arizona, or Montana, or Nevada.

Bert dropped his plans for a nitrogen plant when an analysis of the soil showed too small a nitrogen content to become commercially profitable at the nitrogen post-war price. Instead he opened a real estate office in downtown Miami. His father later took office space with him. The dream of a cattle ranch faded out in the ups

and downs of Florida business life from 1920 to 1930. "The boom, the blow, the bust" is the only too vivid way a Miami banker characterized the period. "The boom" was the premature and inordinate demand for Florida lands, far in advance of development and population increases; "the blow" was the hurricane of 1926 which swept with its center squarely across the city of Miami, damaging or destroying everything loose or frail in its path to the tune of millions of dollars and a number of lives; "the bust" was the natural reaction after the financial binge of the "boom;" it anticipated by four years the national recession of the 1930s.

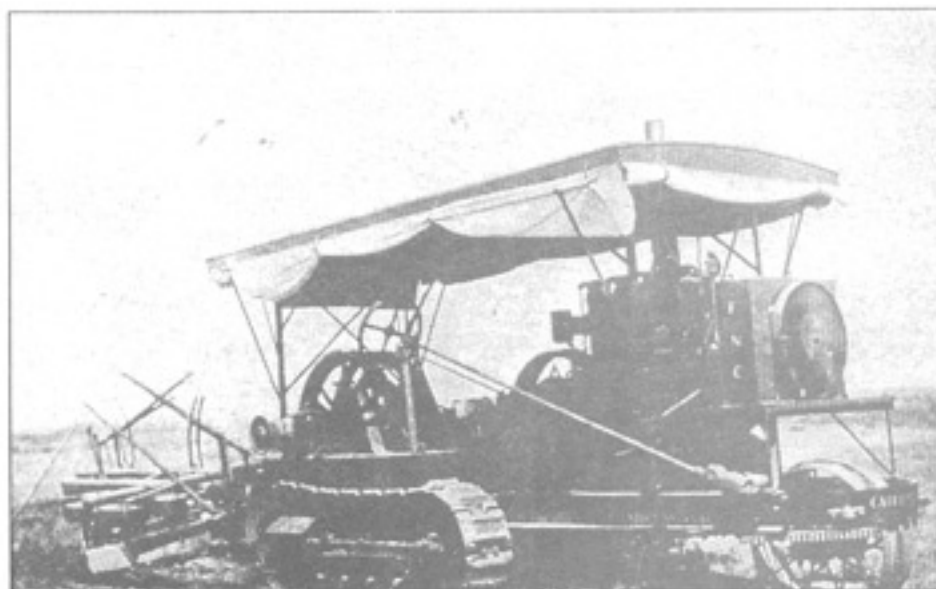
In this crisis in the real estate business Frank turned his attention again to agriculture. By contracting to sell on a shoestring, a pay-as-you-sell basis, three hundred and twenty acres of Everglade land six miles west of Davie and somewhat higher above sea level than elsewhere to a hustling young man from Indiana, he made it possible to set out one of the earliest plantings of oranges in the Everglades west of Davie.<sup>2</sup> The acreage was subdivided into five-acre tracts and sold planted, with a maintenance guarantee. The plan worked; with an enlarged acreage Flamingo Groves became a Davie show place. Others followed suit in planting until the Davie area was almost a continuous orange grove of some six to eight thousand acres.

He himself planted on a small scale as he could finance the venture, experimenting with ten acres out of Miami, first with bananas, then with oranges, only to have each destroyed in turn by summer rains and floods. Then he transferred to the slightly higher land of the Davie area, and planned to plant Valencia oranges of the Lue Gim Gong variety in as many acres as he could as rapidly as he could. Thirty acres he planted then are producing groves today. He did not live to realize this late dream; he died June 20, 1942.

Time has shown that his vision in these great agricultural projects had not been distorted; it had been true that he was in the van of the crowd; to realize it only required more funds, more time, and more effort. The obstacles had been many; some of them practically insurmountable. It was only his judgment that was in error and that mainly in two particulars: 1) he underestimated his ability to surmount obstacles by grim determination; 2) he refused to use the economic rule of nearness to large and growing congregations of people in his appraisal of future values in land. It is not surprising that among his last tired faltering utterances were these words, "All my life I have tried to do too much."



Scenes of hurricane damage in Miami, September, 1926.

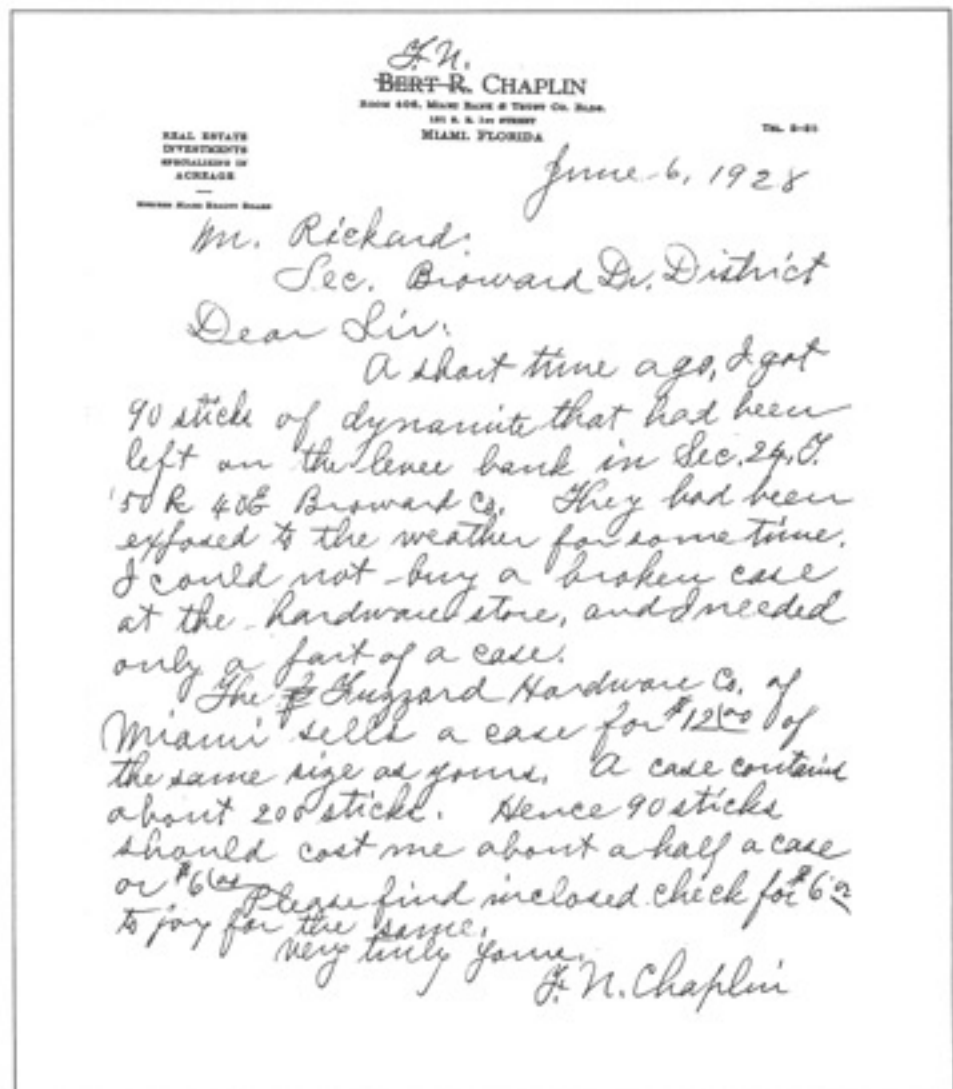


Tractor designed for use in swamp lands  
(courtesy of Bonnie Chaplin Scism).

He could not then see what his children now plainly see that aiming high he had really accomplished much in highly constructive agricultural projects. He had helped immeasurably with his unbounded energy and resourceful thinking in the army of those who reclaimed a desert. True he had failed in reclaiming a swamp, but it had been an honorable failure. Not yet on the ropes at sixty-six, without money and with a family to support, he had thrown the wealth of his past experience into doing his important bit in reclaiming another pioneer front, the Everglades of Florida. In all these undertakings and in whatever else he may have been for the moment doing, he was not a promoter but a farmer at heart, the pioneer. His aim had always been to put more into the land than had been taken off, to produce values, not to destroy them. His mind did not permit doing this on a small scale; it had to be bigger or better to interest him. These tasks challenged a great imagination. All had promise of great economic usefulness. In tasks like these he had realized his great ambition, to make many blades of grass to grow where only one blade (and sometimes none) had been before. A niece thus sums up his spirit in meeting difficulties in his path as she saw it in a number of letters she received from him in the depression years in Florida: "They are full of optimism, but, always while the future seemed to be full of promise to him, the present was full of financial troubles. There is also a constant expression of faith, and general kindness of spirit."

### Notes

1. Quoted from an earlier section of *Elder Asa Chaplin, Revolutionary Soldier, 1739/40-1807*.
2. The "hustling young man from Indiana" is apparently Floyd L. Wray, founder of Flamingo Groves. Although a native of Michigan, Wray had come to Florida in 1925 from Evansville, Indiana, where he managed a wholesale tobacco business covering southern Indiana and northern Kentucky.



Letter from Frank N. Chaplin to James S. Rickards, Secretary of the Broward Drainage District, detailing some of Chaplin's activities in the Broward County Everglades as early as 1928 (courtesy of Bonnie Chaplin Scism).



Postcard showing "picking time" in a Florida orange grove.