Dania Memories

by GLADYS COOLEY

Dania, Broward County's oldest incorporated city, was originally settled primarily by Danes from Denmark, and was nestled on what later became Federal Highway, eighteen miles north of Miami and about four miles south of Fort Lauderdale. In the early days its residents were mostly farmers who planted their crops in the East Marsh one season and the West the next. Dania, like the rest of southern Florida, has three planting seasons, whereas northern states only have one because of the frozen ground.

My parents, Henry G. and Bernice Beasley, settled in Dania in 1907, coming from Tampa, where my sister Bertha had been born the year before. They were no strangers to the lower east coast, having met and married in Miami. In Dania, Papa bought an acre lot with a big frame house with a wide veranda across the front and a big, high, pointy tin roof. When it rained, the pitter-patter of drops on that roof would lull us to sleep. I was born in that house in 1910.

Life was much different in those days before radio, television, and air conditioning. Few people even had telephones, and we had no warning if a hurricane was coming, but we made out alright. Like most Danians, Papa farmed. In the fields he grew corn, turnips, tomatoes, and, at times, strawberries. In later years Dania was judged "the Tomato Capital of the World," and held that distinction until the 1950s, when the intrusion of salt water made farming decline.

In the big barn in back of our house, Papa kept the horse, mules, wagon, and feed supplies. The black hired hands came early each morning to drive the wagons out into the field where Pop kept fertilizer and feed in a shack which also had a well for water. Raising a crop took plenty of fertilizer, and we were in debt to Armour and Company until the season ended. Then we had money in the bank.

At dusk the wagons came rolling in from the field. I would rush out to meet Pop who rode in on horseback. He would always pull me up in the saddle in front of him for a ride to the barn. Fannie, our bird dog, would follow, barking all the way.

One day Fannie wandered down to Main Street, which is now the Federal Highway, where she was hit by an auto. She dragged herself home, laid on the porch where she liked to lay on hot

When Gladys Cooley was born in Dania in 1910, the small agricultural town had only been incorporated for six years and was still part of Dade County.

Mrs. Cooley's "Memories" of her childhood provide a rare, eyewitness view of everyday life for a Dania farm family during the 1910s. Her clear recollections of her earliest years are preserved here in colorful descriptions of local personalities and sites and such distinctive regional experiences as tomato packing, a visit from Seminole Indians, and a trip across the Intracoastal Waterway by boat to the beach. With these are blended remembrances of more universal phenomena, including Model-T Fords, wood-burning stoves, and kerosene lamps which will spark the memory of anyone who lived through this period.

These priceless reminiscences fill the human side of history so often missing from the written record. Mrs. Cooley left Dania when she was still small, but she has returned to Broward County in recent years, and presently makes her home in Fort Lauderdale.

Bertha (left) and Gladys Beasley, Dania, 1914.

Henry G. Beasley, photographed in Miami, c. 1919.

Bernice Beasley (left) and Henry Beasley (right) at a family gathering in Miami in later years. All photos on this page courtesy of Gladys Beasley Cooley.

summer days, and died. She was Pop's favorite bird dog, and he missed her terribly when quail, dove, and deer season began. When Pop was ready to go hunting, Mom always packed him a big hamper of food. He would pack all his gear and head off into the Everglades for days. When he got home he brought us all sorts of good food.

Mom always kept busy too. Beside keeping house, she went each week to the Ladies' Aid, Missionary Circle, and the Quilting Bee, where the ladies worked fast to finish a quilt each week.

Mr. Willers, who had come from Germany years before, ran the general store, where anything from clothes to pins, to groceries, yard goods, and drugs could be had. Mr. Willers lived upstairs above the store. That tall general store building still stands today.

Mr. Willers would shuffle around, trying to please everyone, while the customers stood in circles, talking. From time to time, they would stop talking, shake their kids and tell them to stop running all over, so that they could talk some more and find out what their neighbors were doing or planning to do.

The ladies would also look at the latest pattern book from Sears and

Roebuck of Chicago and buy yards of material for dresses or curtains. All the while the men sat on a bench out front, talking to each other, waiting for their wives, and eyeing everything or anybody that passed.

After visiting Mr. Willers, Mama would hurry home with a new pattern, sure that no one else had it. She would sew non-stop until the dress was finished and then stroll downtown for admiring glances.

My grandmother on Mom's side was Spanish. Her mother came from Minorca, an island off the coast of Spain. In Saint Augustine, where Mom was born, there are many Minorcans, most of whose ancestors came to Florida in 1768, as part of a colony established by Dr. Andrew Turnbull at New Smyrna. The old fort known as the Castillo de San Marcos, many statues, narrow streets, and the oldest house in the United States all make Saint Augustine very pretty. In 1984, my daughter may have found the cemetery where her great-grandmother was buried in 1895. My grandmother died at the age of thirty-nine.

Papa had ancestors of Scotch, English, and Irish origin. When I was growing up, Mom told me many things about our family's past which I cannot now remember.

After church and dinner on Sunday afternoon, Mom would hitch up old Nell, our white horse, for a ride to the cemetery to place flowers on our loved ones' graves. Then we would stop at George Hinckley's hammock, later known as Wyldwood, and pick rose apples, smell the flowers, gaze at the picnickers under the big live oaks and palm trees, and then trot home.

Papa seldom went on these Sunday drives. He preferred to rest on the big leather couch that he had Mom order from Sears in Chicago. I clearly remember the excitement of going to the depot every day looking for it to come.

Model-T Fords and motorcycles were popular in these early years. It was a banner day when Pop brought home a Ford. We gathered around the new car, "oohing" and "ahing," getting in and sitting down. Right away, Mom wanted to drive the car. To please her, Pop sat her in the driver's seat and showed her how it operated. The only entrance to the early model Fords was on the passenger side. Soon after we got the car, Mom was driving it for short distances.

One day, Mom looked at the shiny new car sitting in the barn. Then she started dressing me in my going-out clothes. "We are going places," she said, "but we won't tell Pop." Mom sat Sister in the driver's seat, and, looking very serious, wiggled the levers on the steering wheel. One was the spark; the other was the gas. She put me in the back seat, then walked out to crank the car, telling Sister to pull down the gas lever when it started.

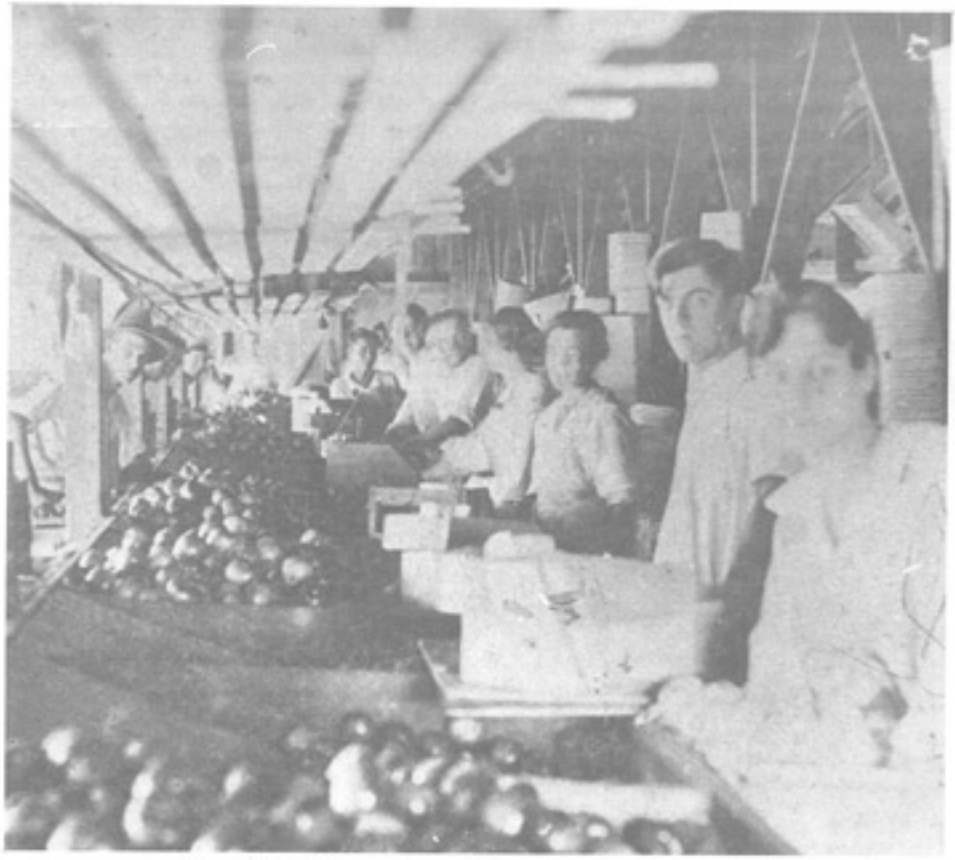
Mom, wearing a big hat tied down with a scarf, a long skirt and gloves, swung the crank around a couple times, and the engine started. She jumped into the car, pushing Sister over, and got behind the wheel. Slowly we moved away from the barn.

Sister kept hollering, "Mom, where are we going?" as we started down the road. Soon we were passing wagons, a few cars, and stragglers walking along the road waving for a ride. Mom waved back and kept on going, telling us children, "We will shop some in Fort Lauderdale."

To get into downtown Fort Lauderdale we crossed over New River on an old single-lane wooden bridge at Andrews Avenue. On the north side of the river, the street formed a circle. This circle was formed by Andrews Avenue on the east, Wall Street on the north, Brickell Avenue on the west, and North New River Drive on the south. By going in one end of the circle you could park, shop, and exit from the other end without turning around.

Charles Willers' store on Main Street (later Dixie Highway and U.S. Highway #1) in downtown Dania, c. 1913-14.

Brickell Avenue, downtown Fort Lauderdale, c. 1919.



Inside a Dania tomato packing house, c. 1910s-1920s.

I can still remember the many pretties we saw that day—things that Mr. Willers didn't have in Dania. Leaving a store laden with bundles, Mom stopped to buy us each an ice cream cone, then bundled us into the car.

Climbing in, she adjusted the levers, then walked out to crank—one, two, three—but the car wouldn't start. Then a fine looking gentleman, who looked like Clark Gable, walked from a nearby store and said, "I hate to see a fine lady cranking a car; let me." He cranked, and this time the car started right off. Mom thanked the man kindly.

We moved out around the circle and back over the bridge, home-bound, tired and happy. Looking out the rear view window we saw, placed along the roadside, big pictures of Pearl White tied on the railroad track, advertising the picture show, as it was called then.

After we got home, Mom couldn't keep her secret. That night, laughing with her dark eyes flashing, she told Pop about our trip. He reached out, patting her dark hair which was coiled in a big bun, and said, "You done that, and you don't know how to back up!" Mom said, "I just went where I didn't have to back."

Washday at our house began when Rose, our black maid, walked out to the woodpile to get kindling wood to start a fire under the boiling pot, which sat up on stones. She would put the clothes into the pot, whites first, and then punch them down into the boiling water with a broom handle or a big stick. When they were ready, she would run a stick through the handles and across the top of the boiling pot. Mom would help her carry the tub to a wash bench, where she removed the clothes, rubbed them on a board, rinsed them, and hung them out to dry.

The blacks, or Negroes as they were usually called in those days, lived west of the railroad tracks, and had to be there by sundown. If a black woman worked in white town after dark she had to carry identification explaining why she was there.

One day Rose was ironing while I lay on the floor playing. Looking up at Rose, I said, "Why are you so black and I'm white?" She said, "Land sakes, chile. It's the way the Good Lord made me, same as He made you white." Mom told me about that conversation years later. She had overheard our discussion.

Mom always wore a big hat, long sleeves and gloves when she worked in her roses and crotons, for southern ladies wanted a peaches and cream complexion. Sun tan was unheard of then.

"Picking" time was always hectic, stirring up the whole town. Farmers worried if they would get their price, and if after the bills were paid and the tomatoes sold, they would still be ahead. Ladies usually visited Mom asking if she was packing this particular season. The tomatoes had to roll on time to the big packing houses close to the railway, so they could be packed and shipped while still green.

The packing houses were long wooden sheds with high roofs. Inside were long rolling belts and long, low benches, where the packers stood. The packer had, placed beside him, a crate divided into four parts. Quick as lightning, he would grab a tomato from the rolling belt, while with the other hand he grabbed a tissue, wrapped the tomato, placed it in the crate, and repeated this process until all four compartments were full. Then he would reach into his apron pocket and remove a number which he would place on the crate or between the baskets. He would set that crate behind him on another low table and then grab another crate. Thus, at the end of the day he knew how many crates he had packed and how much money he had made.

One year, Mama had decided not to pack until Pop ran in one night, all excited, and told us that one of his packers had taken sick, and a replacement was desperately needed.

Early the next morning Rose did not come to care for me, so Mom took me along to the packing house and sat me on a bench near her. She worked fast, but by noon I was restless, so she took me home. I stayed with Rose the next day, and for quite a few days until the packing was done and the tomatoes were rolling on their way across the country.

Our stove seldom went out since we used it for cooking, heating and for bath water. In Florida, the temperature can drop suddenly in winter, although it is not long before the weather warms up again. Sister and I had our baths in a tub in front of the stove. On cold mornings we could hear Mama and Pop laughing about who would get up in the cold to get the stove going. Mom usually won, and we could hear Pop lifting up the grates and putting in the kindling wood. We would snuggle down under Mom's warm quilts until the stove warmed the room. When we dressed in front of the stove, our fronts were warm but our derrieres were cold!

All morning, Mom used the stove to cook a big dinner—cakes, pies, greens, corn bread, biscuits, pork or beef. On the farm we were always up early, worked hard, and had a big dinner, then cold leftovers for supper. Some of the field hands usually came up to the house to eat dinner and set out under

the big mulberry or guava trees. Pop would take their food out to them. Others stayed out in the field eating rice and pork ribs—soul food—from their tin buckets.

Sister and I liked store-bought bread for snacks. If we turned up our noses at the table, Pop would bellow, "We haven't got mocking-bird tongue on toast—eat!" We ate.

The Seminole Indians lived in chickees out in the Everglades, often called the "River of Grass." There, on hammocks amidst flooded glades, streams and canals, they built their chickees from the fronds of palmetto and palm trees. The floor or platform was high off the ground. Chickees were cool in the summer, and if a hurricane came, the wind blew right through them. They were safe, too, from snakes and wandering panthers and wild cats.

One morning three Seminole Indians knocked at our back door. Sister had been in her swing under the guava tree, and when she saw them she ran inside. I was very young, so I hung on to Mom's skirt in the doorway. One Indian said, "We want fire water (whiskey)," adding, "Me work." Mom pointed to the pine logs laying out by the woodpile and said, "If you chop that wood ..." The Indian walked over to the woodpile, picked up the axe and began chopping. As Mom talked, she latched the screen door—the door that was never locked. She reached to a key high up on a hook, walked to Pop's den and unlocked the door. There sat a desk and chairs, where Pop did his book work and had men friends in for a drink and talk, and in the corner stood a double-barreled shotgun. Mom reached to a high shelf and took down a bottle of moonshine, which had been sitting there among several bottles. While she stood there, Mom eyed the gun. Pop had taken her out into the 'glades to learn to shoot it, but he had told her never to shoot it unless her life was in danger.

When she walked back, the Indians were at the door. She handed the 'shine to them and then said, "Wait." She gave them a bit of leftover meats, pies and cakes. They walked away, disappearing into the woods behind the barn.

Summers were grand times in old Dania, especially the beach outings on the Fourth of July and Labor Day. Mom always packed a big hamper of southern fried chicken, buttermilk biscuits, fresh churned butter, green tomato pickles and tomato preserves, cakes and pies. We traveled in Pop's boat up the canal to the beach. Now a four-lane boulevard, Dania Beach Boulevard, bridges the Intracoastal Waterway to the beach. Neighbors usually joined us, bearing good food. We children ran on the golden sand searching for sea shells, while the men played ball.

After we ate the ladies cleared away the food and then, giggling, went behind a big patch of sea grape trees to change into bathing suits with bloomer legs and stockings. The tops had short puffed sleeves. Bathing suits were far from revealing in those days. The men went off in another direction, to another patch of sea grape trees, and changed into knee-length suits and sleeveless tops.

The rest of the day was spent jumping the big waves, laughing and dunking each other. We kids built sand

Seminole Indians (above), with their colorful traditional costumes, were a familiar sight in Dania in the 1910s. Dania Beach (below) was still an unspoiled wilderness when this 1923 photo was taken.

castles, only to have the waves wash them away. As the sun set in the west, Pop said it was time to go, and we climbed into the boat for the journey home.

One New Year's Pop and some men friends were drinking moonshine, laughing and smoking, and they set Pop's boat on fire. They managed to swim to the canal bank. The boat burned up, and they had to walk back to town, wet.

Trips to the beach were always a treat, and a journey all the way to Miami was quite an occasion. I recall once when Mama said we would be going to Miami on Saturday to visit her sister, my Aunt Isobelle. We waited anxiously through the week, but when Saturday came, Mom decided that we weren't going after all. I stomped my feet and yelled loudly. I never could take disappointment. I was a rebel until later in life when so many things hit me that I learned I couldn't win. Mom went out the back door to the guava tree, taking a knife to cut a switch. I hid, but she found me and switched my legs. Sometimes when Mom went out to get a switch I'd run way out back of the barn until I knew she was not mad at me anymore. Unlike me, Sister had Pop's temperament and was calm about everything.

One day, not long after my disappointment over not going to Miami, Mom cut my dark red hair to a Buster Brown style with bangs. Then, hugging me, she said, "We're going to Miami this Saturday." For the trip, Sister and I dressed in sailor dresses, white stockings and small, straw sailor hats. I can still remember how happy I was when Pop took us to the station that Saturday and handed our suitcases to the conductor. I loved riding on the train.

After we took our seats in the train, a fine gentleman sat across from us. Pointing to me, he told Mom, "That's the prettiest little girl I ever saw," and added, "Those brown eyes will break a boy's heart some day." He gave Mom a whole dollar to spend on me. Mom asked him, "Do you have a family?" "No," he replied, "I am a traveling salesman; my life is on the road."

After we arrived in Miami, Mama hired a hack—a horse and carriage—and we clop-clopped over the then-brick streets to my aunt's big house, which had a veranda running all the way across the front and half way up the side. My cousins, Dorothy, Ralph and Robert, and Aunt Bell ran to meet us. You'd have thought we'd never get done hugging and kissing and carrying on. Then we kids were rushed outdoors to the swings under the big oak and palm trees, so the grown-ups could talk.

Ralph, who was fourteen, had a gramophone which we had to wind up to play records. He talked about seeing Tom Mix, Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin at the show for ten cents. He would put on baggy pants, a derby hat and a cane, and kick his heels just like Charlie Chaplin. When his mother played the piano, he sang and tap danced, soft shoe. He had such talent, but he died when he was only twenty-nine.

At one point during this visit, Mama and Aunt Isobelle, who was a beautiful woman, left us at the picture show so they could go shopping at Burdines. I know that Mama must have had a ball seeing all the pretty things there, including dresses hanging "ready-to-wear." Later she said that she had spent all her packing money from tomato season at Burdines. Within a week, through, Mom decided she had to get "these kids" home. I know she missed Papa. I still have many happy memories of Aunt Isobelle's house in Miami. It was there that I saw my first flush toilet, and a big tin tub in the bathroom.

Pop was so glad to have us home that we celebrated by going to the show in Fort Lauderdale. A piano player down front played really fast during the exciting parts, then real dreamily for the love scenes. On the trip back, Papa wrapped a blanket around Sister and me as we sat in the back seat, to protect us from the cold wind which blew right through that old Ford.

Although most early settlers of Dania were farmers, not everyone we knew farmed. Some grew the coontie plant to make starch. Others made fertilizer from mixed soils, while some manufactured tannic acid from the plentiful mangroves that grew along the shore.

Papa's brother, my Uncle Will, visited us from Arch Creek, about fifteen miles south of us, arriving on his motorcycle. During his visit, Pop rode around with him quite a bit. Soon Pop decided he had to have a motorcycle, too. He bought one, but, a short time afterwards, he was thrown off by a passing car, whose side door swung open, and suffered a broken nose and arm. Mom fussed so much that he got rid of the motorcycle right away.

By this time, a war had been going on for several years in Europe, where the Kaiser wanted to rule the world. When Uncle Sam got involved, the war was soon over. I remember lying on the floor during the wartime, watching Mama comb her long hair. Then she would sit in a chair and cry. Her brother, my Uncle Bruce, was in France. He was so close to the fighting, he wrote, that he could hear the big guns in the front lines. Being nearsighted, he did in the army what he had always done in civilian life—bookkeeping—and he lived to come home.

Uncle Will was also in the service, stationed on a destroyer, mostly in home waters. He, too, came home safe to marry and become the father of nine children.

In Dania, the townspeople had it in for poor Mr. Willers because he was German. Papa stood on the corner of Main Street one night and told a group, "Leave Mr. Willers alone. He has lived in this country a long time. He will not harm you." They listened to Pop as well as to the town marshal, and there was no more talk of bothering Mr. Willers. Pop was classified as 4-F by the draft board because he was married and had two children. I didn't remember many of these wartime incidents because I was so young, but Mom filled me in after I grew up.

On Saturdays, Papa trimmed the oil lamp wicks, and Mama polished the chimneys. The chimneys with the hand-painted roses went into the parlor, which was kept locked and opened only for company. A heavy crocheted scarf lay on top of the piano. Another hand-painted chimney went on the lamp in Pop's den.

When my aunt and cousins came up from Miami by train to visit, we kids spent much of our time in our playhouse in the barn, where Papa had built a small stage for Ralph to dance on. After supper, we went into the parlor where Mama played hymns on the piano, and we would sing. Then

my aunt would play "The Missouri Waltz" and Ralph would sing. Then she would play "The Black Hawk Waltz," a real fast number, and she'd trill the keys. She also played a few songs we didn't know. These city relatives went out more than us country people.

After listening to Mom and Aunt Isobelle play the piano, we would all go out on the veranda to sit and rock, or fan ourselves with palmetto fans on a hot night. As darkness set in, we kids would chase fireflies. Then Pop would tell hunting stories, or the story about riding horseback from his birthplace of Orlando to Miami, a trip which took a week, with his faithful dog along. He often told of laying on a pallet at night, by a big fire, waking at times to put more wood on the fire, to keep panthers, bears, snakes and wildcats away.

One day, we kids got tired of playing in the barn. We went outside to the ladder Pop had left leaning there. Up we climbed, and began playing on the barn roof. Somehow, I fell off. I was told by Sister, in later years, that no one had pushed me. When I came to, Mama was leaning over me, rubbing my hands and saying, "My baby, my baby..." But in a little while I was playing again with nothing broken, thank the Lord. Needless to say, that time we all got a tongue lashing, and strict orders for no more playing on the barn roof.

With all of my earliest memories there, it was hard for me to believe that our life in Dania would come to an end, but Papa eventually grew tired of farming, so we sold the house, the horse and mules, and all the supplies. Sister and I stood in the barn, crying and telling our cats goodbye. Neighbors had promised to feed them. In a corner stood an old trunk with castaway clothing we had played house with and a few torn up dolls. I felt as if we would never be happy again.

We moved to an apartment in Miami where Pop worked in the building trade, constructing houses. Sister and I were so lonely in Miami that Mom would often take us on a ferryboat ride to Miami Beach. There was no causeway then. At Smith's Casino on South Beach we could rent a swim suit, towel, and a tiny bathhouse, in which to change, for two hours for twenty-five cents. We played on the sand and picked sea shells. A life line went a few yards out into the Atlantic Ocean for the few brave souls who went in for a swim at night, but this practice ended when people kept seeing sharks.

Our life in Miami was much different than it was in Dania, but that is another story. In later years, whenever I go through Dania, I drive by Mr. Willers' store with a lump in my throat. It is nestled in between fast food chains and antique stores. I pass by the old Nyberg House on Main Street, now the Federal Highway, and Stirling Road. It is made of Florida coquina rock, and I think it will stand forever.

I pass by Mrs. J.W. Black's house on Southwest First Avenue, where kids used to throw rocks at Billy, her nine-foot alligator in the big pond in her yard, when she was away. Two blocks down I see a big apartment building where our house once stood. West on Stirling is the intersection with I-95, a fast, six-lane expressway.

I drive out to the beach, which is heavy with traffic, stores and condominiums, and I sit on the sand watching sailboats waving in the wind, out in the green ocean. Farther out are freighters going to and from many ports. Here, a person can walk out on the fishing pier to fish or just to look at the sparkling, sunlit sea and the tropical fish darting in and around the pilings. An endless stream of tourists from all over the world parades by. The sea grape clusters I remember from my childhood have been long since mashed into the sand, under the heavy boots of workmen building high-rises, condos and hotels.

Downtown Dania scene, Dixie Highway, 1915.