

EDNA PEARCE LOCKETT: LADY OF THE HOUSE

by

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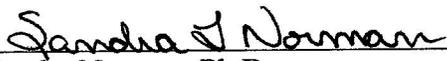
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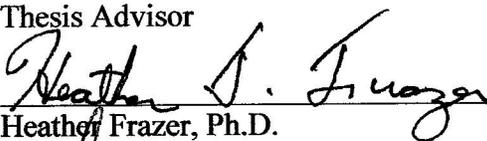
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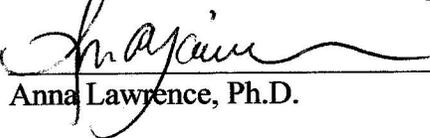
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Sandra Norman, Department of History, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

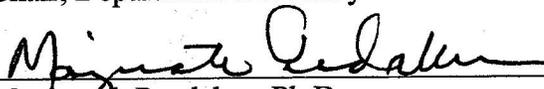
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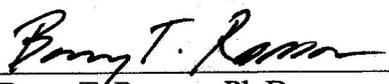

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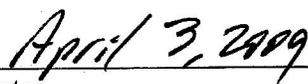

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis demonstrates how some women used the power of their ancestry and family name to run for political office, to become a positive role model for other women, and also to help pass laws favorable to the improvement of gender equality. Edna Pearce Lockett was unique, but also a reflection of the values of her community. Women who ran for office tended to have strong male figures in their lives that treated them as equals. They often were savvy enough to use the novelty of their gender to encourage positive press. Far from trying to be men, they accentuated their femininity through press accounts detailing their fashion sense, their dedication to feminine pursuits, and their ability to be ladies as well as serve their constituency.

Edna Pearce Lockett's life also illustrates what society was like in central Florida during the first half of the 20th century for men and women living on and around the cattle industry.

To Michael

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PREFACE

When most people think of Florida, they are likely thinking of the Florida coast filled with people, condominiums, beaches, restaurants, and traffic. However, in Martin County, if one were to drive west past Interstate 95 one would quickly see the other Florida. Wide open land still stretches for miles. Cattle still graze next to palmetto, cabbage palms, and scrub oaks. Ranches begin to appear with names emblazoned across the entrances to the long driveways leading to big farmhouses or ranch houses. Once in the center of the state, dusty cattlemen dressed in jeans, chaps, and cowboy hats can be seen coming and going from the local stores. Cattle and horses stare out of the back of their trailers. Tiny churches appear often, as do occasional displays of various homemade sets of three wooden crosses. A sign near Okeechobee reads, "Welcome to God's country." One of the biggest stores in Okeechobee is one that sells western wear.

The people who live in the interior of Florida are different from those you meet along the coast. Most of them have family from this area that goes back several generations, and they know each other's family histories. Young and old respond to questions with, "Yes, ma'am," or "No, ma'am." Life is slower here; no one is in a rush. People are friendly and if questioned about the area or their family, they are proud to tell you what they know. Most dress and are coiffed conservatively; often hands and faces are rough from years of working outside.

A stop at the Okeechobee Historical Society on Thursday mornings would reveal the weekly quilting bee attended by many women in SUVs and pickup trucks. Snow birds, people who go north for the summer, are welcomed back into the group in the fall.

People who live in the interior appreciate what they have compared to the hustle and bustle of life along the coasts. Country people are friendlier, more trusting and sometimes even a tad naïve compared to those used to the big city life. The families who have lived in central Florida for generations know each other, and many are connected through marriage, sometimes several generation back. New people are moving to the country and slowly, very slowly, builders are constructing subdivisions between Sebring and Fort Basinger. Wealthy people from the coast are buying lake houses (and there are many lakes around the Sebring area) to have a spot “to getaway into the country.” The Pearce Homestead still sits on the Kissimmee River halfway between the cities of Sebring and Okeechobee. It takes twenty or thirty minutes to drive to one of the cities, and the area is still basically undeveloped country. The only modern sound to hear on most days is the occasional car or truck zipping by on Route 98 that runs by the front of the estate. It sits empty with Junior Miller, former ranch foreman and now caretaker, the only person there most days. Occasionally a group called “Friends of the Pearce Homestead” sponsors a country festival with various demonstrations, tours of the estate, Cracker story tellers, Cracker musicians, and Cracker food, usually barbeque of some type. The goal of this group is to keep the Pearce Homestead alive in the mind of the community so that eventually it can become a museum or used for some other educational pursuit.

There are meetings every so often between the state, the community, and the family to try to decide what should be done with the homestead.

Once a year since 1987 the Florida Cracker Trail Association sponsors a Cross State Ride “to reenact the old Florida cow hunter’s return trip home following their cross state cattle drive and sale of their cattle at the west coast ports of Florida for shipment to the Cuban market.”¹ The participants dress in traditional Cracker clothing and either ride on horseback or ride in a wagon beginning on the west coast of Florida and ending on the east coast. After riding 16 to 21 miles a day they stop and camp every night at various ranches and properties across the state. In 2007 the stop at the Pearce Homestead occurred at noon for a luncheon break. The parade of about one hundred horse riders suddenly appearing around the bend of the road shattered the quiet of the country. The Pearce Homestead came alive when the horses trotted to the water barrels waiting for them, and it was easy to imagine what the place may have smelled, sounded, and looked like during its days as an operating ranch. After watering their horses, the riders lined up at the chuck wagon and ate under the shade of the Pearce trees. They did not hurry; it was a leisurely meal. With only four miles to go to camp that night there was plenty of time for a break during the hottest part of the day.

Finally, the time came to move on, and when the riders left the estate, it returned to the silence of a deserted country home.

¹ Florida Cracker Trail Association, *Florida Cracker Trail, 2007, 20th Annual Trail Ride, 2007.*

INTRODUCTION

This project began with Dr. Sandra Norman of Florida Atlantic University inviting several graduate students on a field trip to Riverwoods Field Lab in Lorida, Florida to examine the Kissimmee River restoration project. The author, along with several other graduate students, traveled to the site and participated in a tour of the Kissimmee River on a pontoon boat through the section of the river that had been restored to its original pathway.² The difference between the wildlife in the channelized river and the restored section amazed all of the participants in the tour. That afternoon Loisa Kerwin, director of Riverwoods, escorted the group on a tour of the Pearce Homestead which is located a mile or two down the road from the field lab. The estate consisted of a hundred year old home, a grave yard with several ancestors' graves, beautiful old-Florida landscape, what was left of a citrus grove, a boat house on an ox-bow off the Kissimmee River, and a recently transplanted one-room school house. The genesis of the idea for this project occurred during this tour when the author decided that much could be learned about the history of the area by studying the life of one woman—the woman who owned the estate, Edna Pearce Lockett.

The thesis that evolved became very different from the initial idea. Edna Pearce Lockett overcame the societal expectations of her gender by serving in political office

² The Army Corps of Engineers at the request of the state completed the channelization in 1971 in a misguided attempt to normalize the hydrologic fluctuations that sometimes occurred.

because of four components of her life. First and foremost, she was descended from one of the founding families which were instrumental in the development of the area.

Secondly, she had a strong father-figure in her life that treated her as an equal regarding many gender specific ranching activities; her father groomed her to take over from older siblings. Thirdly, Pearce Lockett chose not to marry until well into her forties which allowed her the independence to seek political office. And finally, she employed the novelty of her gender to enhance her positions and clout in the legislature. If historians hope to study gender and politics in Florida in the middle of the twentieth century, more studies of individual women need to be conducted.

Societal expectation for women during the 1940s and 1950s following World War II reflected the belief that a woman's highest calling was to be married, have children, and enjoy being the best wife, mother, and homemaker she could be. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* shattered that myth. Friedan stated, "The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world." She argued, "In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture."³ It was during this time period that Edna Pearce chose to run for political office.

The historiography of Florida history regarding female politicians is meager during this time period compared to male politicians. Michael Gannon in *The New History of Florida* (1996) made mention of Mary Lou Baker, the second female representative to Tallahassee, regarding the introduction and passage of the "Women's

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 18.

Emancipation Bill.”⁴ Most other discussions of women in Gannon’s history are generalized, “With the beginning of the twentieth century women began to play a more active and visible role in public life.”⁵ In Gannon’s *Florida: A Short History* (2003) Gannon listed female politicians of the 1950s, and then stated, “Women dramatically improved their position in Florida’s political leadership.”⁶ He continued, “Whereas in 1950 no women held congressional, statewide, or mayoral offices, and there was only one woman in the legislature [Pearce Lockett] . . .” Gannon did not mention Perce Lockett’s name, although he did list the “only three who had gained election to major public offices”⁷ by 1930. All references were mere mentions of the politicians’ names.

Charleton Tebeau and William Marina also provided very few names or details of Florida female politicians in *A History of Florida*.⁸ They mentioned the women (“Mrs.” Ella C. Chamberlain and “Mrs.” William Jennings Bryan) who pushed for the Nineteenth Amendment to be ratified by Florida, and then mentioned the first House member, “Mrs.” Edna Giles Fuller from Orlando. Tebeau and Marina mentioned gender issues again while discussing the ERA debates of the 1970s. They stated, “Meanwhile, women continued to move up the ladder in education, business, politics and the professions, but they remained far short of one-to-one equality with men in employment and compensation.”⁹ Again and again, when Tebeau and Marina mentioned women it was in generalities while male politicians made names for themselves.

⁴ Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 340.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁶ Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ Charleton W. Tebeau and William Marina, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1999), 352.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 479.

Carolyn Ellis and Joanne V. Hawks provided the best chronological description and some analysis of the history of Florida's female legislators from 1928 through 1986 in their article, "Creating A Different Pattern: Florida's Women Legislators, 1928-1986." Ellis and Hawks described Florida as "a traditional southern state" in the early nineteenth century, but "As the twentieth century progressed, Florida evolved from a fairly typical southern state into one more akin demographically and economically to the sunbelt states of the southwest."¹⁰ They continued, "During this time the profiles of Florida's legislative women reveal a different pattern from those of the other states of the Old Confederacy" They then explained that "north Florida's so-called 'pork chop gang' dominated state politics" and that this gang of politicians "flaunted their rural backgrounds and preferences and were remarkably unsympathetic to the needs of Florida's growing urban population."¹¹ Ellis and Hawks then concluded that since this milieu discouraged the "influx of women into state-level politics," the first few women came from central Florida. They argued that women legislators tended to be more educated than the general population and involved in public service, especially through women's clubs and civic organizations. Ellis and Hawks provided analysis of the terms of Edna Giles Fuller and Mary Lou Baker and the challenges they faced as the first two women legislators in Florida: spousal support or lack thereof, financial support, and rearing children. Their article discussed women politicians through the 1980s and concluded that most women entered politics at a later age than most men.

¹⁰ Mary Carolyn Ellis and Joanne V. Hawks, "Creating A Different Pattern: Florida's Women Legislators, 1928-1986," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (July 1987): 68-69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The author gleaned very little specific information about Pearce Lockett in secondary sources, and they supplied only a mention of the other two women who served in the House of Representatives before Pearce. The people of Highlands County remembered Edna Pearce Lockett as the third woman in the state to serve as a representative to Tallahassee. Several local historians' web sites provided the family lineages and a brief outline of the Pearce family in the Kissimmee River Valley. Loisa Kerwin, who is very familiar with the people of the area, suggested names of contacts to interview for first hand knowledge of the estate and of Edna Pearce. The goal is to create the first full-length, though by no means complete, secondary source work on Edna Pearce Lockett and to examine the power she had in the community as a member of one of the largest cattle families in central Florida, how her gender affected her political life, and how she used and overcame those gender restrictions. The resulting project is an attempt to synthesize the available knowledge concerning Edna Pearce Lockett that is spread throughout various newspaper clippings, family papers, the Sebring Historical Society Pearce Papers, and the recollections of friends and relatives through the interview process of oral history.

The oral history interviews provided to this project what the secondary sources could not. Oral history has existed in one form or another since the beginning of time. Before and after historiography began, some cultures used the oral tradition to capture their history. According to oral historian Donald A. Ritchie, the modern oral history movement began as early as the nineteenth century and continued until Leopold von Ranke's German school of scientific history "promoted documentary research to the

exclusion of other, less ‘objective’ sources.”¹² Ritchie stated, “They trained historians to scrutinize documents in their search for truth and dismissed oral sources as folklore and myth, prized only by well-meaning but naïve amateurs and antiquarians.” He added, “They deemed oral evidence too subjective—shoddy memories told from a biased point of view.”¹³ In 1948 Columbia University’s Allan Nevins “established the first modern history archives” through the Columbia Oral History Research office in order to offset the declining sources of letter writing and diary keeping.¹⁴ After other universities began similar programs, most historians understood that oral history could provide one type of source and add to the historical record especially as historical study moved away from the study of elites and toward a more egalitarian history of all socioeconomic, gender, and racial backgrounds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson argued in the introduction to their anthology *The Oral History Reader*:

Through oral history interviews, working-class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities amongst others, have inscribed their experiences on the historical record, and offered their own interpretations of history. More specifically, interviews have documented particular aspects of historical experience which tend to be missing from other sources, such as personal relations, domestic work or family life, and they have resonated with the subjective or personal meanings of lived experience.¹⁵

Oral history provided information about women when they were not included in the main stream historiography. Joan Sangster in her essay “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” argued, “The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and

¹² Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 2. Ritchie serves as associate historian in the Senate Historical Office in Washington, D.C.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998): ix.

that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship.”¹⁶ She continued, “The topics potentially addressed through oral history; the possibilities of putting women’s voices at the centre of history and highlighting gender as a category of analysis.”¹⁷

The interviews conducted for this project provided background information about Edna Pearce Lockett, the family she came from, the community she served, and the era she represented. Some provided leads as to where further information about Pearce Lockett could be located, such as the name of the cemetery where she was buried alongside her husband. Most interviewees described Pearce Lockett as one tough lady who was as comfortable in Tallahassee or London as she was in rural Ft. Basinger. They spoke of her sense of humor and sense of fun. Some provided a glimpse into her ideas about gender issues from conversations that they had had with her. Others supplied information about incidents that proved Pearce Lockett’s and her family’s prominence in the community. The conversations that the interviewees remembered between them and Pearce Lockett brought her and her personality to life. Besides learning from interviewees about her life, historians have an opportunity to learn much about life in central Florida on a cattle ranch during the early and middle parts of the twentieth century.

As valuable as the interviews proved to be, problems arose as well. The interviewees could remember very few dates, and some of them got their own family tree confused. Several interviewees had difficulty remembering or confused other

¹⁶ Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

information, but they did their best and would often admit when their memories were foggy. Most of the interviewees refused to discuss anything other than the positive attributes of Pearce Lockett. Some appeared to be boosters for Pearce Lockett with all the bias that accompanied that boosterism. Many were very forthcoming; however, the interviewer sometimes wondered what was being omitted because it would be disrespectful to “Miss Edna.” And, finally, the interviewer realized that each member of the community had been indoctrinated over the years on the Pearce Lockett “story” by newspaper accounts and community flyers. A surprising number of the interviewees recounted similar lists of Pearce Lockett accomplishments that appeared over and over again in newspaper accounts. Despite some problems, all of the interviewees gave generously of their time and tried their best to be helpful.

Planning the interview had its positive and negative aspects as well. In order to plan for the interviews, an interviewer must prepare questions by researching the subject thoroughly ahead of time. By preparing properly the interviewer was in a position to recognize when an interviewee made an incorrect statement and could note that in the transcript. After several interviews it was evident that whatever information the interviewer planned to learn from the interviewee was very rarely what was actually learned. Sometimes the interviewees had information on topics that only they could anticipate. Some interviewees became loquacious when the tape started and others became reticent. Sometimes the best prediction of what information an interviewee could provide proved to be entirely wrong. The best plan for future interviews would be to understand the timelines, the family tree, and the topics to attempt to cover during the

interview, but to not expect or count on getting that information from the subject. Expect the unexpected and be ready to follow alternate avenues of inquiry.

The project evolved into several chapters. Chapter 1 deals with a history of cattle in Florida, the Cracker persona, and the role of the Pearce family in central Florida. The second chapter provides insight into Edna Pearce's upbringing and strong attachment to her father which allowed her to understand her place as a female yet strive to increase opportunities for women. In the third chapter a short history of those Florida women that preceded her and of the fight for the equality of the sexes in Florida provides insight into the political climate for women during the early twentieth century. As an adult, Edna Pearce began as a teacher, then became a cattlegrower, and eventually ran for the Florida legislature. Chapter 4 demonstrates that her time in Tallahassee was productive. She supported bills for the equality of women and bills for the improvement of Florida's cattle industry, serving on several important committees, including chairing the Health Committee during a particularly controversial time. The next chapter explores the differences between genders in the early 1950s and how Pearce used her gender to become a popular representative from Highlands County. The sixth chapter describes her decision to leave Tallahassee and marry a Londoner. The last chapter deals with Pearce Lockett's final years as a widow living alone on the Pearce Homestead and how she herself would like to be remembered. Taken all together Edna Pearce Lockett lived a life of accomplishment because she was a product of her family's longevity in the community, her father's faith in her abilities, and her own ability to use her gender to encourage positive press.

CHAPTER 1:
CATTLE AND THE PEARCE FAMILY

Every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills.
Psalms 50:10

The first record of domestic cattle being brought to North America traces back to Ponce de Leon in 1521 when he brought a small herd of Spanish Andalusians to Florida. The Calusa Indians attacked the Spaniards forcing them to retreat, but there is no record of what became of the cattle. In 1540 Don Diego Maldonado brought a herd to Santa Rosa County, Florida which was either lost or stolen by the local Indians. Don Tristan de Luna tried a colony at Pensacola in 1559 which failed, and again some cattle were left behind. St. Augustine was founded in 1565 by Pedro Menendez de Aviles, and he imported two hundred heifers. They eventually dwindled down and disappeared due to both Indian raids and mosquito attacks.¹ Just how many cows the local Indians made off with is unknown though they were not known for keeping herds of cattle in the sixteenth century.

The first ranches were established by the early 1600s, and they spread across northern Florida. The Spanish Trail across northern Florida consisted of small villages called “doctrinas” which were inhabited by Franciscan friars, mission Indians, cattle, and horses. During the 1640s prime breeding stock was imported from Cuba, and, at about

¹Joe A. Akerman, *Florida Cowman, A History of Florida Cattle Raising*, (Kissimmee: Florida Cattlemen’s Association, 1976).

the same time, hostilities began between the Indians and the Criollas (persons born in Florida to Spanish parents) over range rights. By 1704 the hostilities between ranchers (both English and Spanish) and the Indians of Florida became so fierce that British Governor James Moore of South Carolina invaded northern Florida and killed or captured seven thousand Indians, inadvertently driving off the mission cattle.² In the first two hundred years of the European occupation of Florida, relatively few Spanish immigrants came to live in Florida, contrasting with the English occupation from 1763 to 1783. Many more people from north of the border moved to Florida after the Spanish departed. British frontiersmen (eventually called “Crackers”), escaped slaves, and the Seminole Indians³ immigrated from the Carolinas, Alabama, and Georgia. By the time the ownership of Florida had transferred from Spanish to English to American rule, the superior European breeds of cattle and horses brought by the Spaniards roamed freely in Florida and became great herds of wild cattle.⁴

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, great ranges stretched across the middle of Florida. Descendants of the Spanish cattle roamed freely, and were available to anyone who bothered to round them up. These “scrub” cattle were gaunt and bony little cows, but they “had adapted to their environment and had developed an unusual stamina and resistance to floods, heat, and insects. One carcass rarely dressed out to more than

² Ibid., 10.

³ Akerman. The translation of the word “Seminole” has been translated as “Those Who Live Apart,” “Renegade, and “Wild People.” The original Creeks applied it to the Lower Creeks who decided to migrate to Florida.

⁴ Alto “Bud” Adams and Lee Gramling, *A Florida Cattle Ranch*, (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1998), 62-63.

three hundred pounds of beef—a tough and sinewy meat at that—but they were a hardy, nourishing food staple and free for the taking.”⁵

Many of the Cracker cowmen could trace their ancestry back to England, Ireland, and Scotland. One early influx of Scottish immigrants occurred when a hurricane hit Charleston, South Carolina and destroyed a fleet of ships on its way to Nova Scotia. The survivors moved inland, settled, and began to raise cattle.⁶ When some moved to Florida, they came with a few cattle, their families, all their household goods, and experience with herding. Frequently they moved several times before they settled in a permanent location like the Kissimmee Valley. Most of the descendants produced eight to ten children, and many intermarried so that the offspring in the community were related by blood as well as being neighbors.

The flavor of how these early settlers lived can best be illustrated by studying the lives of some of the individuals and finding the essence of the Cracker spirit. Jacob Summerlin (1820-1893) was considered by many to be “King of the Crackers” in pre-Civil War Florida. Born in Alachua County (from the Spanish Rancho de la Chua)⁷ to a small rancher, he arrived in the Peace River Valley area with a few cattle and learned very quickly that the Spanish government in Havana, Cuba would pay⁸ for every cow he could deliver to Punta Rassa, just south of Fort Myers. As Summerlin began to accumulate wealth, he bought the Punta Rassa wharf, several other buildings, and one

⁵ Gene M. Burnett, *Florida's Past: People and Events That Shaped the State*, vol. 3 (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1991), 102.

⁶ Adams and Gramling, 67. The influence of the Scottish can be seen in the original costume of the Seminole Indians. The kilt, leggings, tartan, and tam became part of the Seminole dress.

⁷ Akerman, 9. Throughout the lists of family ancestors and even today the same names of the original families appear over and over again: Anglo names such as Adams, Albritton, Alderman, Bronson, Collier, Hendry, Lykes, Mizell, Parker, Pearce, Peeples, Skipper, Smith, Tucker, Williams, and Yates.

⁸ Cuba would pay \$12 to \$16 dollars a head.

thousand acres of land. Eventually he would rent the cow pens and send his own men out to buy cattle from other ranchers to sell at a profit.⁹ Summerlin was one of the wealthiest men in Florida before he was forty years old.¹⁰ His history of beginning life as a poor rancher to becoming an affluent one would be repeated by others in varying degrees as the cattle industry prospered in Florida. The original Pearce ancestor in the Kissimmee River Valley arrived with a few cattle and prospered as well.

Folklore developed around cowboys such as Bone Mizelle who “rode hard, drank hard, lived hard, was a crack shot with a rifle or six-gun yet had a temper generous to a fault, leavened somewhat by an impish prankster spirit that enlivened many a dull long drive.”¹¹ Though he never became wealthy, by the time he died in 1921 he enjoyed a “moderately prosperous cattle business.”¹² The cause of death at fifty-eight listed on his death certificate stated, “Moonshine—went to sleep and did not wake up.”¹³ The cowboy lifestyle would take a toll on the life expectancy of Florida cowboys, even though they were often glamorized through folklore and song.

Many Floridians of the nineteenth century could have been considered “Crackers” and would have been pleased to be so considered. The idea of being a “Cracker” played into the identity of the community. Summerlin’s nickname, “King of the Crackers,” may have come from the fact that he was a known expert with the whip, supposedly able to

⁹ Burnett, 102.

¹⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹¹ Burnett, Gene M., *Florida’s Past: People and Events That Shaped the State*, vol. 2 (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1986), 81.

¹² Ibid., 84.

¹³ Ibid.

“decapitate a snake or gut a hen with one snap.”¹⁴ He retained with pride his cracker persona, even while amassing a fortune and influencing state politics. “He made sure, for example, that Orlando and Bartow were the respective county seats for Orange and Polk counties. But he did it all in his chosen style—low-key Cracker.”¹⁵ Summerlin may have “chosen” that style because that approach replicated the manner of his neighbors and served him well illustrating the power of big cattlemen in both the community and the state.

Many Florida cattlemen sold, shipped, and made a profit on cattle that they provided to Cuba. Those that were successful usually repaid the community by acts of philanthropy and service. During the Civil War Summerlin supplied beef first to the Confederacy and then to the Union forces at Ft. Myers. He and Tampa Capt. James McKay eluded the Union blockade and resumed shipments of beef to Cuba. After the war, while most of Florida was economically depressed, Summerlin flourished by selling to the Spanish during the Cuban Revolution of 1868 and continued to do so throughout the Spanish-American War in 1898.¹⁶ The “King of the Crackers” was a shrewd businessman, investing all along the way in homes, acreage, and citrus groves while engaging in philanthropic endeavors such as the Summerlin Institute at Bartow and the development of Polk and Orange counties.¹⁷ He understood that he could forever amass community support, cooperation, and his own power by his philanthropic activities.

¹⁴ Hence the idea that the term “cracker” came from poor Floridians and their diet of cracked corn or the sound of the cowboy’s whip. Both would have applied to Summerlin, at one point or another, in his lifetime.

¹⁵ Burnett, vol.2, 103.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 104.

Generosity to the community immortalized the benefactor's name when that name appeared on schools, bridges, or public plazas.

The cattle boom started for most in about 1865 and peaked at the end of the nineteenth century when most of Florida struggled to emerge from the effects of the Civil War. This was about the same time that the western part of the United States was flourishing.¹⁸ From Fort Meade to Fort Myers the land was a vast array of scrub flats, piney woods, and palmettos. Many who settled here from Georgia and the Carolinas endured poverty, until or unless they could establish a herd of cattle. The Kissimmee River Valley was in a perfect location, halfway between the cattle ports of Punta Rassa on the west coast and Fort Pierce on the East coast.

Frederic Remington visited central Florida in the 1890s, and compared, unfavorably, Florida cow hunters with the western cowboys of whom he was so fond. He published an article about his trip in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in June, 1895 entitled "Cracker Cowboys."¹⁹ His use of the word "cowboy" indicated his ignorance of the true Florida cowmen or cow hunters who did not use the term cowboy to refer to themselves "until fairly recently."²⁰ He described the land unflatteringly as "flat and sandy, with miles of straight pine timber, each tree an exact duplicate of its neighbor tree, and underneath [the trees grew] the scrub palmettos, the twisted brakes and hammocks, and the gnarled water-oaks festooned with the sad gray Spanish-moss—truly not a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 98.

²⁰ Adams and Gramling, 69. "Cowmen" referred to a rancher or owner who owned at least eighteen head of cattle, but cow hunters would have been the Florida equivalent of the Western term "cowboy." The term "round-up" would have been translated as "cow hunt" in Florida.

country for a high-spirited race.”²¹ Remington was equally dismissive of the Florida cowmen asserting that they were “well paid for their desperate work, and always eat fresh beef or ‘razorbacks,’ and deer which they kill in the woods.” He continued his biased account, “The heat, the poor grass, their brutality, and the pest of the flies kill their ponies, and as a rule, they lack dash and are indifferent riders” Remington also did not appreciate the skill required by the well-trained herding dogs. He stated, “A strange effect is added by their use of large, fierce cur-dogs, one of which accompanies each cattle-hunter, and is taught to pursue cattle, and to even take them by the nose, which is another instance of their brutality.”²² Remington’s prejudiced account omitted important information about the landscape in Florida compared to the landscape in the West. Florida was not conducive to twirling the lariat while riding, nor was it logical to use cowmen to go into the dense vegetation when a pack of cur-dogs could trail, catch, and guard the cattle better in such an environment. The dogs “could throw full-grown bulls to the ground” and were used as protection against panthers and wolves.²³ Remington also failed to appreciate the cowmen’s use of the bullwhip, “which some handled with enough skill to pop a bird out of the air, kill a rattlesnake, or turn a stampede.”²⁴ According to rancher “Bud” Adams and writer Lee Gramling, “Florida’s cowmen developed their own distinctive style over the years, and they take as much pride in their catch dogs, cow whips, and sturdy Cracker ponies as their Western contemporaries do in the big spurs, silver Concho hatbands, mustangs, and lariats that have become part of our national

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

mythology.”²⁵ The Pearce family of the Kissimmee River Valley in Highlands County exemplified the Cracker lifestyle and took great pride in their own history of cattle ranching in Florida.

During the first part of the nineteenth century only Seminole Indians inhabited the Kissimmee Valley. In December, 1837 Col. Zachary Taylor marched east from Fort Brooke (now Tampa) and established Fort Basinger²⁶ on the west side of the Kissimmee River. Captain John Munroe’s company erected a pine log stockade which contained a blockhouse and several lookouts. Taylor and his troops returned to Ft. Basinger after the Battle of Okeechobee and the fort remained active for several months. Both Fort Drum and Fort Basinger housed troops during the Third Seminole War, but by 1860 the forts were abandoned.²⁷ Early on, settlers considered the land south of the line of forts (Ft. Pierce, Ft. Drum, Ft. Basinger, Ft. Meade, and Ft. Myers) Indian territory.²⁸ After the Civil War and by the turn of the century, Basinger, a town east of the original fort and on the Okeechobee County side, “was a bustling cowboy community”²⁹ and dealt with the needs of the people who lived between Sebring and Okeechobee. During its heyday, Basinger supported a general store, two hotels, clothing stores, and a post office. The citizens enjoyed social events such as, “square dance frolics or hoe-downs, quilting bees, and picnics where tater pone, cassava pone, venison, chicken “perlo” with home grown

²⁵ Adams and Gramling, 69.

²⁶ Fort Basinger was named in honor of Lt. William E. Bassinger of Georgia who was killed in the Dade Massacre of 1835. Basinger was originally spelled Bassinger, and is still pronounced with a short “a” sound.

²⁷ Kyle S. Van Landingham, *Pioneer Families of the Kissimmee River Valley*, 1976, 2001. http://www.lamartin.com/history/pioneer_families_kissimmee_river_valley.htm.

²⁸ Adams and Gramling, 65.

²⁹ Mike Woodfin, *Basinger*. <http://www.ghostowns.com/states/fl/basinger.html>.

rice, wild turkey, and beef were served.”³⁰ The town of Basinger disappeared when the highway system by passed it, and the railroad chose the town of Okeechobee as a stop instead of the Basinger area.³¹

Captain John Mizell [pronounced my-zell] Pearce found the Kissimmee River Valley between Sebring and Okeechobee to be perfect for his cattle operation. He was born 17 November 1834 in Columbia County, Florida to Reverend Levi and Mary Jane (Hooker) Pearce.³² Reverend Pearce served the community as he rode the Methodist circuit, and he originally began to raise cattle to supplement his income.³³ In 1843 J.M. Pearce moved with his parents to the Alafia River settlement in what was Hillsborough County, and later became Polk County near Peas Creek³⁴ During the Third Seminole War, 1855-58, J.M. Pearce served as a scout in several volunteer companies, including Captain William B. Hooker’s Company. At one point in his service, he surveyed Seminole activities in the Kissimmee River Valley.³⁵ At the end of the Seminole War, Pearce married Martha Ann Lanier whose family was from Bulloch County, Georgia. They married on 11 February 1858 in Manatee County, Florida and eventually had ten children. Her parents were Luke Pridgen and Mary B. (Williams) Lanier, relatives of the famous poet, Sidney Lanier. J.M. Pearce owned eight hundred thirty cattle by the time the Civil

³⁰ Ackerman, 151.

³¹ Woodfin.

³² Ibid.

³³ Akerman, 137. According to John B. Moody and Spessard Stone in “Heritage of Edna Pearce Lockett” Rev. Levi Pearce’s father, John Pearce, was born around 1763 in North Carolina where he served as a Revolutionary War soldier, but moved to Georgia about 1800. After his death in 1827 or 1828, his widow, Ann Cain Pearce, and most of their children moved to Alligator (now Lake City), Columbia County, Florida.

³⁴ Spessard Stone, “John Mizell Pearce,” *Cracker Barrel*.
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~crackerbarrel/Pearce1.html>.

³⁵ Jennie A. Reninger, “The Honorable Lady,” *All Florida Magazine*, July 31, 1953. According to Jennie Reninger, Edna Pearce’s secretary, “Captain John Mizell Pearce . . . first came to Ft. Basinger down the Kissimmee River as an Indian scout about 1855,” and did not forget the positive features of the area.

War broke out,³⁶ but during the Civil War, he enlisted in the Confederate Army in Captain F.A. Hendry's Company which was part of Colonel J.C. Munnerlyn's Cattle Guard Battalion. He served as an orderly sergeant in the special cavalry company, while continuing to establish a large, prosperous cattle business, until the surrender of the Confederacy in 1865.³⁷ As his cattle business grew, J.M. Pearce began to contemplate a move to a rural location that would provide room for his business to grow and prosper.

After the war, Pearce was headquartered at Fort Meade until 1875. He decided to move his family to Fort Basinger and build a pine log home on the western side of the Kissimmee River (about 1.5 miles south of the present location)³⁸ becoming one of the first settlers in what is now Highlands County.³⁹ Pearce had explored the area while working as a scout and "fell in love with the land while serving in the Seminole War."⁴⁰ In 1880, the Internal Improvement Fund of the State of Florida deeded him one hundred and fifty-seven acres including the abandoned Fort Basinger,⁴¹ a benefit of being an Indian War veteran. Once there, along with all of his other businesses, Capt. J.M. Pearce ran a steamboat ferry, the *Mary Belle*. She assisted travelers across the Kissimmee River until she sank around 1884. The Kissimmee River steamboats provided an important link to the outside world for the first white settlers. Running or riding in a boat up and down the river was much more tolerable to many than trying to walk or ride in the rough terrain.

De Soto County (now Highlands) was established in 1887 so Captain Pearce applied

³⁶ Stone.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Van Landingham.

³⁹ Reninger, "Honorable Lady."

⁴⁰ "Fort Basinger" *Tampa Tribune*, November 30, 1992.

⁴¹ Sebring Historical Society, undated flyer from a "Festival" held at the Pearce Homestead.

for a license to continue his ferry operation. The license was granted in 1887⁴² and the license described all of the various types of travelers in the community that Pearce ferry served. Beside running the ferry and cattle businesses, Pearce served as Deputy Sheriff and for some time served his community as “the only law enforcement office in the lower Kissimmee River Valley.”⁴³ An article in the local newspaper, the *Highlands County News*, stated, “For many years he was the head of an extensive cattle business and negotiated some of the largest cattle sales ever made with Cuban cattle buyers in South Florida.” The article continued, “At that time he was the only law enforcement officer south of Kissimmee and east of Ft. Myers.”⁴⁴

Captain Pearce died at Fort Basinger 28 September 1897 and was survived by his wife, Martha A. Pearce. He left his estate to his widow.⁴⁵ Soon after her husband’s death, around the turn of the century, Martha Pearce built a larger home overlooking the Kissimmee River which would eventually become the Pearce Lockett Estate. According to Charles “Dan” Johnson, J.M. Pearce’s great great-grandson, “The original house had three bedrooms, a small living room, one outside bedroom that was attached to the porch, a dining room, a kitchen, and a sleeping porch, and that was it.”⁴⁶ Since this house was considered “much larger” than the original house, it stands to reason that the first home was quite small especially with ten or eleven family members living there.

After the death of J.M. Pearce, Martha and her fifth and favored child, Sidney, ran the ranch together. In December 1907, the widow Pearce had an eight pound abdominal tumor

⁴² Van Landingham. It “contained the following maximum rates: Footman, \$.15 Man and horse, \$.25 Horse and buggy or other single team, \$.50 Double team, \$.75 One yoke of oxen and cart or wagon, \$.40 Two yoke of oxen and cart or wagon, \$.60 Each additional yoke, \$.15 Each additional animal, \$.05.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “New Bridge Dedicated to Highlands Pioneer: Named in Memory of W.S. Pearce, Developer of Area,” *Highlands County News*, May 8, 1953.

⁴⁶ Evelyn and Charles “Dan” Johnson, interview by author, CD, June 20, 2007, Sebring, FL.

removed, and according to her doctor, C. G. Reagin, M.D. of Fort Meade, “The removal of the tumor gave her a new lease on life . . .”⁴⁷ She lived another four years and died in 1911 at the age of 74. Martha A. Pearce was buried beside her husband in a small cemetery on the Pearce property. The cemetery eventually contained the graves of their daughter, Laura Pearce,⁴⁸ and several grandchildren, and it is still preserved on the Pearce Estate today.

William Sidney Pearce, born in January 1866, was the fifth child and third son of John and Martha Pearce, and they named him for his mother’s kinsman, Sidney Lanier, the Southern poet.⁴⁹ In 1894, he married Meroba (Mellie) Virginia Hollingsworth, and they produced four children: Leland Clifford, Ruth (who died in infancy), Pearl, and Edna Mae. Sidney and Mellie Pearce built a home near Cornwell (a few miles to the west) that they called “the White House place” which boasted the luxury of glass doors.⁵⁰ When his mother passed away, Sidney bought the Pearce Homestead from the estate and moved there with his family.⁵¹ Edna Pearce, his youngest daughter, was three or four years old at the time of the move. She would grow to become the owner of the house and to inherit the Pearce Estate and cattle business.

Sidney played an integral part in the community. In 1910 Sidney donated the land to the community for the Fort Basinger School, which provided for up to fifty students

⁴⁷ “Fort Basinger” *Tampa Tribune*.

⁴⁸ Laura Pearce was born in 1861. After a short marriage to Finley Gillespie, she then married her second husband Robert Henry Alderman in 1888 who was the second son of William and Martha Jane [Hollingsworth] Alderman. The Alderman family arrived in the Kissimmee River Valley around 1863 where William became an active and wealthy cattleman. The Pearce, Alderman, and Hollingsworth families all intermarried over the years.

⁴⁹ Van Landingham.

⁵⁰ Reninger, “Honorable Lady.”

⁵¹ *Ibid*. He used the P-4 brand which may have represented his four children. There is also the theory that the P-4 represented Sidney’s birth order, but he was the fifth child, not the fourth, of J.M. and Mellie Pearce so that theory does not hold up. Therefore, it would make sense that the four would represent his own four children.

from the area to attend, including his own children. The school instructed students for approximately twenty-five years.⁵² Then, in 1916, he built a private, wooden toll bridge over the Kissimmee River along what is now Route 98. The community, as well as strangers, paid to cross the bridge. Sidney and his son, Leland Clifford Pearce, served on the county commission. They worked together to run the ranch while his daughters, Pearl and Edna, attended and eventually taught in the school that their father built.

The family lived in an extremely rural location. The desolation as well as the living conditions tended to make family members close. Consecutively ten children and two parents lived in two relatively small homes, although there was a twenty-eight year difference between the year of the first born and the year of the last born so that through marriage and movement they did not all live together at once. Sidney Pearce's granddaughter, Evelyn Johnson, attempted to explain how a family with ten children may have fit into the original and subsequent home. She stated, "People didn't have as many clothes back then, and they didn't have all the stuff we have today, and they didn't have a place for that, and they probably didn't even have closets. Maybe they had a dresser."⁵³ Both Evelyn and her son, Dan, confirmed that there were no closets in the original house until much later when Sidney's daughter, Edna Pearce, renovated and added a second floor.

The sleeping porch was attached to the back of the house. Sidney hired cowboys only when he needed them to complete ranch work. Evelyn Johnson stated, "There was a sleeping porch, and that's where my grandfather [Sidney] and the cowboys slept." She continued, "They'd usually have one or two guys that lived there—it was screened—I remember it had those roll up curtains that you could roll up and down." She added, "My grandfather's bed was

⁵² "Fort Basinger" *Tampa Tribune*.

⁵³ Johnson interview.

first, and it must have had six or seven more beds.”⁵⁴ Dan Johnson added, “It was a bunkhouse attached to the house.”⁵⁵ Sidney worked and slept with his men during the serious herding and ranching weeks. Cow men and cowboys both performed the hard work of the cattle ranch, and Sidney worked and slept with his men during those weeks.

The interior of Florida has been cattle country since the Spanish brought over the first few cows in the sixteenth century. The renegade cattle grew in number until they became the beginnings of many poor ranchers’ herds. Eventually, cattle outnumbered people and it remained that way. The low density of the population combined with the stability of the same families continuing to live in the same area created an extremely close-knit community. Edna Pearce came from a family whose roots in the community and the cattle business ran deep. Her grandfather, John Mizell Pearce, arrived before most of the other residents of the county and with his location on the river, assumed important roles such as riverboat captain, ferry operator, deputy sheriff, and cattleman. His ten children cultivated friendships and marriages throughout the county and state. Her father, Sidney, served the community as toll bridge operator, county commissioner, and cattleman. Her brother continued to serve the community as county commissioner until his death. Both the community and the Pearce family reaped rewards through their close association.

The Pearces gained power in the community as the network of ties continued to grow over the years in Highlands County. One example of the young Edna Pearce’s influence in the district would be evident in her relationship with the school superintendent when she taught in the one-room schoolhouse her father built. Edna’s

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

niece, Evelyn Johnson, remembered, “If she needed to do something, she’d just tell the kids we were having a holiday, and they wouldn’t come to school and the superintendent was real good friends with the family and whatever she did was fine with him.”⁵⁶ The Pearce family enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with their community; the Pearces served their community for over a hundred years and the community responded with pride in their accomplishments.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2:

EDNA MAE PEARCE: YOUTH

*I am all the daughters of my father's house,
And all the brothers too.*

Shakespeare: *Twelfth-Night*, II, iv, 122.

Edna Mae Pearce was born on 16 October 1908 near the house that her grandmother built on the shore of the Kissimmee River. She was the youngest of the four Pearce siblings and “a daddy’s girl.”¹ Through the generations the Pearce family grew and spread throughout Florida. A distant cousin, John Moody, who visited the Pearce Ranch each year between 1924 and 1929 for the annual Pearce family reunions, remembered, “From Tampa we would set out in our Franklin touring car. The roads were good, and we averaged 35-40 miles per hour.” He continued, “Our caravan was formed at points along the way. From Bloomingdale came some Pearces. Out of Tampa by Alderman’s Ford, we were joined by a car with related Aldermans.” Moody finished by stating, “There were four to six per car, and by the time we got to trail’s end after an all-day trip of over 100 miles there were six or seven cars.”² Pearces and relatives of the Pearces lived all over central Florida; the gathering of the relatives proved the interconnectedness of the Pearce family in their community and with other Kissimmee River valley families.

¹ Suzanne Lamb, to author during Cracker BBQ @ The Historic Pearce Homestead, 19 May 2007.

² John B. Moody and Spessard Stone, “Heritage of Edna Pearce Lockett,” unpublished, 1999.

Once in Fort Basinger, Moody remembered as a boy playing with the young Edna and all the other young Pearce relatives. Moody recalled she was “in pigtails and five or six years older” than him and “just one of the group.”³ The Pearce and Hendry children played together and camped out in the Ft. Basinger Schoolhouse which was located “across the way” [across Rt. 98 and back in the woods]. The reunions would last at least two days, and on one of the days there would be a “big get together.” Moody stated, “It was an old-fashioned affair with the local people providing the food, featuring a barbeque.”⁴ Some of the husbands and all of the kids slept at the schoolhouse “in little tents” while the rest of the attendees went to a little town called Micco a mile or so to the east.⁵

According to a local newspaper account, on a visit to Brownsville near Arcadia, Florida, little Edna remembered visiting relatives and spending the night. Her older sister Pearl “had to sleep on a sack of black-eyed peas for a bed” that was “so uncomfortable that she cried herself to sleep.”⁶ As the baby of the family, Edna slept in the bed with her parents. As time passed, she grew to be a strong, tall woman. Audrey Vickers, friend and political associate of Edna’s, stated, “She had to have a big horse—sixteen hands is the smallest horse she could get on. There’s a good picture of her out here in front on the horse—the big one.” She added, “But if she rode in a parade or anything you had to get a big horse. She was a tough lady and as strong as an ox.”⁷

³ John Moody, interview by author, videocassette, 22 March 2007, Ft. Basinger, FL.

⁴ Moody and Stone, 1999.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “She Stood Before Kings,” *Lake Placid Journal*, 28 March 1985.

⁷ Audrey Vickers, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

Junior Miller, Edna's eventual foreman and caretaker of the estate, remembered Edna speaking about her life as a girl on a cattle ranch. She would tell him about "how they used to run cattle from here to Ft. Myers, I believe it was, and she'd talk about that." He recalled, "She was kinda a cowboy girl, I think she was. The way she talked she was, long ago in that day."⁸ Audrey Vickers, while arguing that Edna was reared differently than most girls, stated, "I think the fact that her father gave her jobs that he would've given to a son and she did them. She was as comfortable on a horse as she was in a car."⁹ Several family witnesses to Edna's relationship with her father characterized it as a strong one.

Eventually Edna and her older sister Pearl would become teachers in the little school built by their father. Vickers asserted, "Her father built the school so that she'd [Edna] have a place to teach."¹⁰ However, when Sidney built the school in 1910 he probably built it so that his children could attend a nearby school—rather than to teach in one. He may have wanted his children to have the formal education that was denied to him. It is possible that he had the foresight to imagine one or both of his daughters serving as teachers before they married, since teaching was one of the few positions available to rural women.

Several of the local schools had "teacherages." One of the schools in Sebring and the Lorida schoolhouse, about ten miles away from Fort Basinger, had them. Vickers explained, "That was a boardinghouse for teachers. Miss Edna didn't need that because she got on a horse and went back and forth to school." She added, "[Teachers] who have

⁸ Junior Miller, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL

⁹ Vickers interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

[sic] nowhere to stay, and so they would board there, and they had a woman who was like a housemother, and they had a kitchen, and a laundry.”¹¹ The teacherages varied in size depending on the number of teachers needed for the community.¹² Vickers recounted, “One of the interesting stories about the Lorida School is that the principal would come out once a week. And he fell in love with one of the young teachers.” She continued, “And so he came out two or three times a week, and they later married.” Vickers concluded, “He said he had to do it because somebody needed her place in the teacherage.”¹³

Edna attended the Fort Basinger School for an elementary education, and then she attended Sebring High School. Because the road was so rough between Sebring and Fort Basinger (Route #98), she usually stayed in town during the school week and returned home on weekends. Her niece, Evelyn Johnson, remembered, “When she was in high school, she lived with us (Clifford and Clara’s home) out in De Soto City.”¹⁴ After graduation she attended Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University) for one year, and then Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics. While in college she participated in the Vagabond Society, the “War Canoe” team, and was a member of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority.¹⁵ She also did graduate work at the University of Havana, Cuba.¹⁶ After graduation from college she returned to teach in the Fort Basinger School. Mellie Pearce,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Vickers stated that the one in Sebring had six bedrooms while the one in Venus, a tiny town located in southern Highlands County, had only three.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Evelyn and Charles “Dan” Johnson, interview by author, video tape, 20 June 2007, Sebring, FL.

¹⁵ Audrey Vickers, “Miss Edna, Former Legislator, Honored on Tallahassee Trip,” *Sebring News-Sun*, September 23, 1984.

¹⁶ Jennie Reninger, “The Honorable Lady,” *All Florida Magazine*, 31 July 1953. According to her niece, Evelyn, Edna spent a summer studying in Cuba.

Edna's mother, passed away in 1932. Her father and her older and only brother, Cliff, ran the P-4 ranch during her time away at school and when she returned to teach. According to her nephew, Charles "Dan" Johnson, Edna herself always had a hand in running the ranch, even while teaching. He stated, "Edna helped run that ranch when Grandpa was still there. You know, she was teaching school and running the ranch so when her brother died, she just continued on."¹⁷

Edna taught for about three years when tragedy struck and changed her life's goals. In 1934 her brother Cliff was killed in an automobile accident. The accident, according to newspaper reports at the time, occurred in the late afternoon when Cliff and another cattleman, C.D. Jenkins, were returning to the ranch after looking over some possible grazing land and ran their car into the railing of a bridge at a fairly high rate of speed. Jenkins was killed instantly while Cliff sustained a skull fracture and died a day later without regaining consciousness. While there was no official explanation as to why the two local men would crash their car into a bridge railing around four o'clock in the afternoon, some relatives suggested that speed or alcohol may have been involved.

The newspaper account left no doubt as to Clifford's standing in the community at the time; however, it may also have contained a clue about the accident by praising Cliff's virtues and suggesting there may have been some vice. It stated, "The deceased was one of the prominent cattlemen of the state and served eight years as county commissioner from his district, six years as chairman of the board." It continued, "For the past several years the people of that section of the county depended on him in times of storms and other disasters as they had been accustomed to depend on his father for many

¹⁷ Johnson interview.

years and he never failed them in time of need.” The paper concluded, “His good deeds and service to his neighbors far out weighed [*sic*] any faults he may have had and his neighborhood and the county has lost one of its most valued citizens.”¹⁸ The prominent and lengthy article along with the plea to remember the good Cliff and his father had done for the community perhaps suggested some citizens needed to be reminded about always speaking well of the dead and one of their own.

His daughter Evelyn Johnson believed speed caused her father’s death at an early age. She stated:

They were out—that’s where the cattle were—they were out in Brighton that day. . . They were on their way back in town and that road at that time was just a real crooked one, and it’s not there any more. They’ve straightened it out. There was a bridge, water on each side My dad was a fast driver. He drove too fast. He had a new, brand new 1934 Chevrolet. They didn’t make that turn that went over the bridge.

A new car, a crooked road, and the love of speed may have been the true causes of the accident. Whatever the cause or causes the town of Sebring halted all activities to honor the Pearces. The family held funeral services at the Sebring Methodist Church during which “all offices in the court house” and “a majority of the business houses” were closed “in respect to the memory of the deceased.”¹⁹ The community paid their respects to Cliff, expressed its sympathy, and rallied around the Pearce family in the face of tragedy.

At this point in Edna’s life, she quit teaching school and returned to help run the ranch along with her sister Pearl and her sister-in-law Clara. Sidney Pearce was in his

¹⁸ Sebring Historical Society possesses a copy of a newspaper article entitled, “L.C. Pearce Killed in Automobile Accident, Lives 24 Hours Without Regaining Consciousness; Companion Killed Instantly,” 12 July 1934. The name of the newspaper was omitted.

¹⁹ Ibid.

sixties and must have been reeling from the fairly recent death of his wife and the death of his only son. The governor appointed Clara, Cliff's widow, to his seat on the County Commission. She would serve out his term and be elected to two more terms as one of the state's first female county commissioners. Clara and Cliff's daughter, Evelyn Johnson remembered, "The governor appointed my mother to be the county commissioner. She served for about ten years, I guess. She was the first lady county commissioner in this county. It certainly was a rarity in that time."²⁰ She may have been the first female county commissioner in the state. Former county commissioner and friend of Edna's, Audrey Vickers, described a conversation she had with Edna where Edna suggested Clara may have been the first female commissioner in the state of Florida. However, Vickers remembered more clearly a conversation with Earl Ridge, clerk of the court, who believed Clara only completed her husband's term. He stated to Vickers, "Now there's no need for you to do any research on Clara Pearce. She was appointed to fill her husband's vacancy and retire from politics."²¹ Vickers disagreed:

Well, I knew from her daughter, Evelyn Johnson, that that hadn't happened and indeed when I got into it [the research], not only did she run again after the first time and had an opponent, she beat him good. She ran twice more unopposed. So she actually served—between the two of them, they served twenty years. She stayed on the commission and that is sometime overlooked.

The first Pearce woman to hold office was actually an in-law who stepped up to the plate when fate made the offer and then held onto her new-found place as a community leader. The community appeared to have supported her, probably because of the Pearce name and the history of the Pearce family's place in Highlands County. Her abilities allowed

²⁰ Johnson interview.

²¹ Vickers interview.

her to secure the position for a longer time than just the remaining years of her husband's term because she was elected two more times.

The three women, Clara, Edna, and Pearl, became famous for running such a large ranch. According to the *Lake Placid Journal*, "When she [Edna Pearce] came home from college, she began acquiring land to add to her home place in Highlands County. This was to become one of the largest and most successful ranching operations in central Florida."²² Each sibling had his or her own branding iron.²³ Eventually Edna's sister and sister-in-law moved away from the homestead, and Edna became the sole owner of the P-4 ranch. Clara, a young widow with children, lived outside Sebring in DeSoto City. Pearl, Edna's older sister, according to Evelyn Johnson, "... didn't like country life. She liked the big cities. She didn't stay down there all that much after she grew up." Johnson stated, "My mother [Clara] and Pearl and Edna ran it [the ranch]. They split. They divided their cows up and they each took their own cows. We lived in De Soto City, that's just right outside of town [Sebring]." The De Soto City home was where Edna had stayed while attending Sebring High School.

While the Pearces operated one of the largest ranches in central Florida, many small cattle ranchers also operated in the area throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Beedie Mae Thomas and her husband owned a small ranch about five miles from the Pearce Homestead on the Okeechobee side of the county line, providing a glimpse of the life of a small rancher there. Beedie Mae remembered how they could first afford a ranch, "My daddy was thirty-eight and Momma forty-two when they died. Dad had a

²² "She Stood Before Kings," *Lake Placid Journal*.

²³ The irons recently found in the barn of the P-4 Ranch included an "E" for Edna, a heart with a "W" inside, possibly for William (her future husband), and several others, since each person on the homestead who owned cattle fashioned his or her own brand.

ruptured appendix and mother had cancer of the cervix.” She continued, “I was nine when Daddy died, and then I was thirteen when Momma died, and I lived with my sister, and I got married when I was sixteen.”²⁴ Her son, R.E. interjected, “What she needs to tell ya, she inherited some cattle and she sold her cattle, and bought the property. She’s the reason we got it [the ranch].”²⁵ The Thomases bought the ranch in 1936, a year after marrying. Beedie Mae then stated, “We sold enough of ‘em to buy the rest of the land. That eighty acres—we tax deeded it. People that let their taxes go down. It cost us about \$25 for the eighty acres.” She added, “Then we bought the rest of that section for \$1.75 an acre. Far cry from what it is now.”²⁶ Today the Thomases own about two hundred cattle. When asked about the price of cattle, Beedie Mae replied, “Up and down. Right now they’re about as good as I’ve ever seen ‘em Get pretty bad sometime, but I stayed with ‘em.” She added, “We never had bought any cattle—always just raised ‘em.”²⁷ The cattle they started with they allowed to breed and formed the herd without purchasing outside cattle. R.E. Thomas stated, “She’s owned cattle all of her life because it’s a tradition back then to give a baby heifer calf . . . and she’s had cattle continuously and some of the same bloodlines and cattle that she’s originally had.”²⁸

Life in the country during the first half of the twentieth century lagged far behind the coastline in modern conveniences for both the Pearces and Thomases. The Thomas house has withstood wind and weather for seventy years and originally cost around three hundred dollars. Ranchers had kerosene lights and pumped their own water. Before the

²⁴ Beedie Mae Thomas and R.E. Thomas, interview by author, videotape, 11 September 2006, Okeechobee.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

1930s, communication between the ranches in the Kissimmee River Valley and “civilization” occurred by word-of-mouth, letters, and maybe a battery operated radio. Beedie Mae stated, “When I was a kid, you didn’t know when anything was a comin’. I remember—I don’t know what year it was—that evening we woke up during the night and it was a hurricane.” She recalled, “I mean, it was a tearin’ up things!” Her son added, “We didn’t get lights ‘til 1949. We got telephones in ’58.” Close by, the Pearce Homestead lived the same way as its smaller ranching counterparts—without electricity and phone service. Electricity became available at about the same time Representative Edna Pearce convinced the state to pave the main road between Sebring and Okeechobee. Once the road was paved it was much easier to install electricity.

The Texas fever tick slowed down the development of the beef industry in Florida and affected both large and small cattle operations. In 1923 the Federal Government joined with the State Livestock Sanitary Board to begin a program to eradicate the problem. The Thomases, Pearces, and other local families lived through two cattle dippings—one in 1923 and again in the 1940s. Some cattlemen protested the program in 1923 by leaving the cattle business, dynamiting the vats, or shooting it out with federal range riders. Most ranchers grudgingly co-operated.²⁹ When the Thomases were asked what the ranchers thought about the dippings, both mother and son agreed. “We thought it was a bad thing,” Beedie Mae stated with a chuckle. Her son laughed as well when he added, “Country people didn’t like the government tellin’ ‘em what to do.” He then described the operation:

²⁹ Gene M. Burnett, *Florida’s Past: People and Events That Shaped the State*, vol. 3 (Sarasota; Pineapple Press, 1991), 220.

Bad thing was they originally dipped ‘em with arsenic. Those cows, they go in there head first, go completely under, swim out on the other I don’t know how they kept from killin’ ‘em. [Laughs] They had different vats in different areas you had to take your cattle to. They furnished the material. They had people there to make sure you done it!

Beedie Mae continued, “When the cow came out they painted, painted him with swabs. It let people know They would have range riders to come around and if they found some that hadn’t been dipped they had to get ‘em and dip ‘em.”³⁰ The dipping went on until on September 14, 1944 a declaration decreed Florida beef free of Texas fever ticks. The beef industry in Florida flourished as beef prices rose, herds were upgraded, livestock markets were established, and the Florida Cattlemen’s Association promoted better standards.³¹ Many members of the Pearce family who owned cattle became active in the Florida Cattlemen’s Association including Sidney and Edna. She would eventually serve as an Honorary Director of the Florida Cattlemen’s Association, thereby receiving recognition as one “who [has] made special contributions to the state’s cattle industry.”³² By 1950, one million cattle grazed in Florida making the state first in cattle raising in the southeast region and twelfth in the country.³³ And by 1948 Edna Mae Pearce had one of the largest cattle ranches in the state of Florida.

³⁰ Ibid., Environmentalists today would agree with R.E. Thomas’s assertion that the arsenic cattle dipping was not environmentally sound for the cattle or the environment. According to Mark Derr in *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida*, “Rain hitting the backs of recently treated cattle concentrated the arsenic solution on their bellies, causing their hides to crack when the dip dried The environment also suffered, as arsenic washed into the water supply, and the poison’s residue, which coated the dipping vats, proved hazardous to animals and people who sought to play in or drink water collecting there.”

³¹ J.E. Dovell, PhD, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, vol. II, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1952), 873.

³² Joe A. Akerman, *Florida Cowman, A History of Florida Cattle Raising*, (Kissimmee: Florida Cattlemen’s Association, 1976), 268-271.

³³ Dovell.

CHAPTER 3:
FLORIDA AND THE FIRST WOMEN IN THE LEGISLATURE

There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. As well speak of a female liver.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Edna Pearce grew up in Florida, and as an educated Floridian knew about current affairs relating to women's issues. She understood the mores of Southern society even in the rural ranching area in which she was reared. In the years following the Civil War Florida remained a traditional southern state regarding gender issues; women's roles paralleled those of the other states of the old Confederacy.¹ Women had separate and unequal roles in society. Then on August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women across the nation the right to vote, even in states such as Florida which had voted against it. Since Florida had voted against it, the state chose not to ratify the amendment until 1969, "and then only as a symbolic recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the Florida League of Women Voters."²

The newspapers of the 1920s provide insight into just how opposed some in Florida were to women attaining suffrage. Some newspapers editorialized their support of the Nineteenth Amendment, while others warned of the dire end of the federated

¹ For a complete discussion of women's roles in the South see Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970).

² Allen Morris, "Florida's First Women Candidates," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 63, no. 4, (April, 1985): 406.

republic. *The Tampa Tribune* had not technically opposed women's suffrage, but "while stubbornly proclaiming the right of the state to grant this privilege, has never once said they should not have the privilege,"³ and calmed its readers by stating that, "there is no need for alarm over this new entrant to the voting booth." It continued, "We are not one to believe that woman's entrance into the political arena means besmirching her skirts, or her mind. Most of those who will vote will be the mothers of the country; and we believe, 'A mother, is a mother still, the holiest thing alive.'"⁴ *The Jacksonville Metropolis* congratulated Florida women, and immediately took the opportunity "to remind them that it was one of the first papers in Florida to endorse equal suffrage, and the cause has been supported unvaryingly since then, although at the beginning of the fight the majority of the state press were rampant opponents."⁵ *The Jacksonville Times-Union* injected race into the issue when it stated, "A situation confronts the people of this state and they should face it; they can't avoid it by imitating the ostrich." It continued, "The women have been enfranchised and many of the white women, we think probably the majority of the white women in Florida, did not wish the ballot." After stating that many white women will not vote, it concluded, "But we are confident that no such reluctance to vote will be found among the negro women."⁶ They used the fear of many whites that African Americans were trying to take over at the voting booth to promote anxiety in the general public concerning suffrage for women.

The strongest opposition to the amendment came from *The Miami Herald* which warned of the end of any states' rights and with the end of states' rights, the end of the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Morris citing the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 19 August 1920.

⁵ Morris citing the *Miami News*, August 23, 1920, quoted by *Jacksonville Metropolis*, 20 August 1920.

⁶ Morris citing the *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, 28 August 1920.

republic. In an article entitled “The Rape Complete,” the paper argued that the Constitution had been raped for the second time within two years (the first being the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment which started Prohibition). It stated, “The United States is no longer a federated republic. The states, as such, have practically disappeared and as time goes on, one after another of the rights that they have thought reserved to themselves will be taken away and the government will be centralized at Washington.” The warning concluded with, “State lines have been wiped out and the states themselves become only names of provinces, parts of a centralized and powerful government whose basic law may now be changed almost at will.”⁷ The states’ rights argument obscured the paper’s anti-suffrage stance, especially since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Some denouncers of the amendment argued over the details. Minor controversies erupted, such as whether women should pay the poll tax for one year or two since payment was required for two years prior to an election. Since women had not been able to qualify for two years, they were only required to pay the one dollar for one year. Another such debate arose over whether a special session would be required to eliminate the word “male” from the voter requirements. A question arose regarding how women would be registered: under their husbands’ names with “Mrs.” or whether “they are to give their Christian names?” *The Tampa Tribune*, in a perceptive statement, asserted that her full name must be used because, “it recognizes their personality and an identity as never before She is not recognized because she is the ‘wife’ of any man, the ‘daughter’ of any man, or the ‘widow’ of any man.”⁸ The use of a woman’s Christian

⁷ Morris citing the *Miami Herald*, 26 August 1920.

⁸ Morris citing the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 20 August 1920.

name was considered rather radical in many circles in the 1920s, and it would not be the last time the topic would be raised.

The first female candidates appeared in Florida in 1920 when three women ran against twenty-six male candidates for presidential electors, with six males winning the race. In 1922 two women ran for the Florida House of Representatives, one from Taylor County and another from Pinellas County. Myrtice Vera McCaskill from Taylor County taught school and organized Florida's United War Work Fund during World War I. Her father encouraged his daughter's entry into the race even though her mother had reservations.⁹ Even within families people differed over gender issues, and a strong father figure encouraging a woman to go forward seemed to be present in many of the women's lives.

The women who were willing to step forward and run for office faced skepticism from both males and females in the electorate. McCaskill was single at the time of the race, but her daughter later related an incident she had been told relating to her mother's campaigning from the back of a pick-up truck. Seeing a group of women chewing tobacco and sitting on the porch of a backwoods shack, McCaskill approached them about her campaign. After spitting in her direction, one woman called her "that hussy that's a-running for the Legislature." Then, according to McCaskill's daughter, "She told mother to 'leave politicking and moonshining to the menfolks. That's all they're good fer anyway,' and she spat again."¹⁰ Obviously not all women were interested in furthering the future of female politicians or in equal rights for women in general. McCaskill's son remembered, "One of the other issues in the campaign other than mother being a woman

⁹ Morris, 411.

¹⁰ Morris, 412.

was that she was roundly criticized for being a college graduate.”¹¹ The voters held her education against her instead of seeing it as a benefit for any possible office holder.

Floridians also grappled with the issue of cattle dipping during this election with farmers and ranchers opposing it, but McCaskill supported it. So it was not surprising when W. T. Hendry, a lawyer and opponent of cattle dipping, entered the race at the last minute. In the final tally, she received 197 votes to Hendry’s 835.¹²

The other woman to run for representative that year actually took on the opposite sex by stressing the superiority of the female’s ability to get things done when contrasted with the males who already served in the House. Katherine Bell Tippetts of St. Petersburg in Pinellas County believed she could do a better job in the legislature than male legislators, as she stated, “The first great shock to the women new to the methods of the Halls of the Legislature is the fact that during the first weeks of the Session the men assembled to thrash out the grave problems of the state act like a bunch of boys kept unwillingly in school.” She continued, “The slightest mention of invitations to picnics or fish fries calls for the motion to adjourn to attend same, and it is not ‘till visions of continuous House and Committee meetings loom menacingly that the older and stricter members are able to hold the boys in check, some of whom had rather vote to adjourn for picnics, seemingly, than for their favorite bill.”¹³ She received a total of 660 votes to her male counterpart’s 948.¹⁴ It would be another six years before the first woman would be elected to the Florida House of Representatives.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Morris citing Democratic primary returns, June 6, 1922, Department of State, Florida State Archives.

¹³ Morris citing unidentified clipping, probably from a Pinellas County newspaper in the last week of the 1921 session, in the possession of William E. Tippetts of St. Petersburg.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Edna Giles Fuller

The first female representative to Tallahassee, Edna Giles Fuller, was the daughter of a Methodist minister and began her life near Plant City in 1874. At the age of fourteen she moved to Orlando to live with her uncle, James L. Giles, who was a wealthy real estate investor and businessman. He appeared to have taken an interest in the young girl and her education as well as providing a strong male role model. After attending high school in Orlando, she attended Rollins College for a year, and then completed a Bachelor of Arts degree from Centenary in Cleveland, Ohio. Giles taught school for one year in Starke, Florida where her father had a church, and then returned to her uncle's home in Orlando to teach. While she was away John Thomas Fuller, a wealthy businessman from Tennessee, had become a real estate partner of Edna's uncle, James Giles. Once Edna met J.T. Fuller, the attractive man from Tennessee, a courtship ensued, and Edna Giles married J.T. Fuller on August 3, 1904.¹⁵ The Fullers "moved into the 14-room high ceilinged former George B. Green home, built in 1884," and it became a "center of social activity,"¹⁶ After giving birth to two daughters, Giles Fuller became a young and wealthy widow upon her husband's death in 1912. She traveled with her children (and several adopted children) on trips to New York and North Carolina. On October 31, 1916, her uncle, James L. Giles, was appointed to be Mayor of the City of Orlando, to fill the unexpired term of the late Mayor E. F. Sperry. By April of 1917 Edna Giles Fuller represented the Realty Board on the newly formed (by her uncle) City

¹⁵ *Orange County, Florida Marriage Records*, vol. 1, 1869-1909, bk. 2, p. 231.

¹⁶ Eve Bacon, *Orlando: A Centennial History*, vol. 2, (Chuluota, FL: Mickler House, 1975), 318.

Planning and Zoning Commission.¹⁷ Her strong relationship to a powerful man must have aided and encouraged her in her public service. In 1919, Rollins College made Giles Fuller a trustee of the college, and President Herbert Hoover appointed her as Assistant Food Administrator for Florida, which called for her to travel the state speaking to women's clubs and civic groups. Travel, education, administrative duties, and speaking engagements all served as training for the future legislator.

Orlando led Florida regarding the women's suffrage movement when Dr. Mary A. Safford, the founder of the Florida Equal Suffrage Association, moved to Orlando in 1913.¹⁸ By March 1914 Orlando had a Men's Equal Suffrage Association which supported the women's organization, and women voted in the municipal elections of 1919, before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. By 1921, The Florida Equal Suffrage Association had become the League of Women Voters with Edna Giles Fuller serving as its first president.¹⁹ In 1928, Giles Fuller ran for the Florida House of Representatives and, with her win, became the first woman in Florida to enter the House. Fuller ran "on a record of twenty years of constructive public service."²⁰ Upon being introduced to the House by Speaker Samuel Getzen, she attempted to quell any fears by stating, "There may be some trepidation among members of the House as to a woman serving in its ranks, but I urge you not to feel this way about me."²¹ The first bill she helped design dealt with dependent mothers and children. Most of the other bills she

¹⁷ William Fremont Blackman, PhD, *History of Orange County Florida*, (DeLand, Florida: E. O. Painter Printing Co., 1927), 109-110.

¹⁸ Jerrell H. Shofner, *Orlando: The City Beautiful* (Tulsa, OK: Continental Heritage Press, 1984), 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sidney Ives to Allen Morris, 9 August 1982.

²¹ *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, 4 April 1929.

introduced dealt with local matters.²² She served in the 1929 and 1931 sessions and was credited with raising funds for the chapel at Raiford Prison.²³

The most controversial event during Fuller's service centered on a House resolution to protest Mrs. Herbert Hoover's entertaining the wife of a black congressman in the White House. According to Allen Morris, House Clerk, "The incident stirred immense controversy, with some southern newspapers blasting Mrs. Hoover "for 'defiling' the White House."²⁴ The original resolution stated, "that the act of Mrs. Hoover in thus entertaining a negro woman on a parity with white ladies was both shameful and disgraceful and if persisted in will destroy the prestige of the Anglo-Saxon race and set at naught the social fabric of the country that has for ages guarded and kept sacred the purity of our Anglo-Saxon blood which stands for the highest type of Americanism."²⁵ After the House amended the resolution to a less harsh wording and omitted Mrs. Hoover's name, it passed and Fuller voted for it. She stated, "In explanation of my vote, I am in sympathy with the principle of the resolution which emphasizes one of the recognized bases of solution of racial problems in this country, but am not at all in sympathy with the wording of the resolution and do not approve the use of the words 'shame' and 'disgrace', nor the use of the name of the wife of the president."²⁶ Her statement upholds segregation as "one of the recognized bases of solution of racial problems." The struggles for racial and gender equality continued to stir controversy.

²² Morris, 415.

²³ Ibid., 319.

²⁴ Morris, 415.

²⁵ Morris, citing *Florida House Journal*, 1929.

²⁶ Ibid.

During the 1931 session of the House, Florida's finances were in dire straits. The collapse of the land boom in the twenties combined with two hurricanes had hurt the Florida economy right before the whole country, as well as Florida, suffered through the Great Depression. Due to these circumstances, the legislature completed a regular session of sixty days plus two twenty-day special sessions, now known as the "Hundred Day Legislature." When the legislature finally settled the budget, para-mutual betting at horse and dog tracks was legalized with Fuller voting in opposition. She ran again in 1932 for the 1933 session and lost her seat, as did most incumbents that year. According to House Clerk, Allen Morris, "Seventy-eight per cent of the members of the 1933 House were freshmen."²⁷ It appeared that voters voted their pocketbooks and chased most incumbents out of office.

Edna Giles Fuller consistently served her local community through service on various committees before and after having been elected. When Orange County formed its chapter of the American Red Cross, Edna Giles Fuller chaired the membership committee.²⁸ Her name is sprinkled throughout the narrative history of Orlando in *Orlando: A Centennial History*; however, it is impossible to find her name without knowing her husband's name. For example, in 1918, "Mrs. John T. Fuller was appointed as chairman of the food conservation program for Florida, traveling the State in her work, lecturing and giving demonstrations."²⁹ In 1928, "Mrs. John T. Fuller" was elected Florida's first woman legislator defeating her opponent by 868 votes out of a little over

²⁷ Morris, 416.

²⁸ Blackman, 79.

²⁹ Bacon, *Orlando: A Centennial History*.

seven thousand casted votes.³⁰ In 1930, “The Chamber of Commerce undertook an employment program in an attempt to improve business conditions. Mrs. J. T. Fuller was the originator of the plan, serving with a committee”³¹ The next year, “The Chamber of Commerce appointed a new inter-racial committee, headed by Mrs. Edna Giles Fuller and Mrs. Peabody, to study unemployment problems of the Negro.”³² It appeared that her Christian name became the norm after the year 1931. In *Orlando: A Centennial History* Edna Giles Fuller was consistently referred to as Mrs. John T. Fuller or Mrs. J.T. Fuller until the 1931 entry when her Christian name was used along with the prefix Mrs. Only after serving two terms as a Florida legislator was it appropriate to employ a woman’s Christian name rather than her husband’s name. Suffrage inspired female candidates leading to the first female representatives; they initiated the slow march toward equality of the sexes.

Mary Lou Baker

Twelve years later the second female representative to Tallahassee, Mary Lou Baker, was elected in 1942 for the 1943 session of the House. Baker was born in British Columbia in 1915, moved to Pinellas County, Florida in 1925, graduated from Clearwater High School, and went on to earn a law degree from Stetson University. After law school, she acquired a working knowledge of legislative procedures while indexing House journals. The House at that time reflected the male world that it was: cigar smoke,

³⁰ Morris, 415.

³¹ Ibid., vol. 2, 48.

³² Ibid., 53

spittoons, and rural politicians determined to keep taxes low and have a good time while they were doing it.³³

When Ethel Murrell, a Miami lawyer, gave an address at Florida State College, she asserted that Florida law put married women “in the same class as lunatics and idiots.”³⁴ That statement fostered a state-wide debate, and it prompted Mary Lou Baker to run for the state House and to introduce the Married Women’s Rights Bill, nicknamed by the press as the “Women’s Emancipation Bill.”³⁵ It conveyed to married women the legal right to exercise power of attorney, to sue and be sued, to convey property, and to execute property. With the country involved in World War II and many men enlisted, women were asked to hold down the home front by taking jobs that were traditionally men’s work. Women, as many as 350,000, enlisted into military service themselves. Even with the obvious changes in men’s and women’s roles, many male representatives spoke against Baker’s bill. Rep. Archie Clement of Baker’s own county “called it dangerous.”³⁶ E.P. Martin from Plant City in Hillsborough County argued, “I’m not opposed to women’s rights—God knows they have more rights now than any man can ever hope to have. I’m trying to protect them.”³⁷ When the bill passed, many were surprised, but Baker enthused, “Isn’t it grand?” The *St. Petersburg Times* stated, “No bill of the session has followed so erratic and unpredictable a course to victory.”³⁸ The *Florida Law Journal* editorialized, “To Mary Lou Baker, the lady from Pinellas, must be given credit for accomplishing the most historic change which has occurred in the basic law of the

³³ Gary R. Mormino, “Ms. Baker Goes to Tallahassee,” *Tampa Tribune*, 12 August 2007.

³⁴ Morris.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

State of Florida in the past generation.” It concluded, “Through her tenacity and courage it was finally enacted into law in the closing days of the session.”³⁹ Some time later, the Florida Supreme Court upheld the new law.⁴⁰ Justice Elwyn Thomas stated, “The strange illogic of the common law rule becomes more striking as the years pass.” He continued, “In this century we find women, married ones, engaged in every conceivable business and governmental enterprise.” Finally, he concluded, “Yet, under common law, a single woman with the right to manage her property, lost the right and was regarded as incompetent when she married.”⁴¹

Baker sponsored a bill to allow women to serve on juries which failed to pass. Some of those who opposed the bill worried that “Negro women” would be on juries.⁴² Others, like Rep. Warren Sanchez of Live Oak thought that the average mother should “be more concerned about her children at dinner time than listening to testimony in a trial.”⁴³ Some even brought forward concerns over the extra cost of separate restrooms for male and female jurors. It would be a few more years before the women of Florida could serve on juries.

Mary Lou Baker’s use of her maiden name became a campaign issue when she ran for re-election in 1944. Eventually she felt compelled to explain why she was using her maiden name:

³⁹ Morris, citing *Florida Law Journal* 17 (July 1943), 191-93.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Ellis and Joanne V. Hawks, “Creating a Different Pattern: Florida’s Women Legislators, 1928-1986,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 66, no.1, July, 1987.

⁴¹ Morris, 418.

⁴² Mormino.

⁴³ Ibid.

The purpose of a name is to designate an individual, and to distinguish that individual from others. I received my law degree and my certificate to practice as Mary Lou Baker. Mary Lou Baker is my name and I am entitled to every particle of good will attached to the use of that name as a result of my own efforts, but nothing more. It might even be considered unsportsmanlike for me to use the name of my husband upon the ballot and thereby borrow from the good will established by the name of Captain Seale H. Matthews. My husband is well known and most favorably known. On the other hand, the church membership of my husband and myself, and my own membership in the Eastern Star and other ladies' organizations, which memberships are predicated upon Seale's membership in the parent organizations, are in a different category. There we work jointly and jointly received the benefits and benisons of those organizations. There I am intensely proud to be known as Mrs. Seale H. Matthews. I hope St. Peter has the names so recorded in his big book.

Baker's political savvy is evident in this shrewdly worded statement because she highlighted her hard work in receiving her law degree, her "sportsmanlike" concern for playing fair, her husband's service in the military, her involvement in women's groups, and her religious affiliations. Her concern over "borrowing from the good will established by the name of Capt. Seale H. Matthews" seemed to have ebbed when they released his endorsement of her to the radio and press. The letter stated, "My wife, Mary Lou Baker, is an excellent housewife, an able lawyer and legislator, a prudent business woman. She writes and speaks clearly, concisely, convincingly, yet tactfully. She possesses great beauty, poise, charm, and friendliness. All who know Mary Lou love and respect her. Re-elect her and you will again be proud of the superior and distinguished service you will receive from her, a legislator of skill, ability and patriotism."⁴⁴

Much can be gleaned from this statement regarding the feminine attributes considered important during this era and how women were expected to walk the fine line between femininity and capable leadership skills. Capt. Matthews (and probably Mary

⁴⁴ Morris, citing *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 May 1944.

Lou and her staff) carefully worded his endorsement so that Mary Lou's abilities as a housewife and female superseded her talents as a lawyer and legislator. Words like "beauty" and "poise" were specific to her gender. Male legislators did not need the endorsement of their wives, nor would they need a statement about writing and speaking clearly and concisely. Most voters would expect a leader to speak and write clearly and concisely if they were male.

Baker's constituency re-elected her, and on Election Day she announced the fact that she was pregnant. According to Baker, she telephoned her husband with the news that same day; she had kept secret "this domestic item lest it be thought knowledge of it was permitted in order to influence the voting."⁴⁵ The question arises as to how the voting would have been influenced if the voters had known of her pregnancy. Baker suggests it would have positively influenced the voting in her favor; however, it could have negatively affected the voting if voters thought a pregnant woman should be home, out of sight, and not over-worked as many did in the 1940s. By releasing the news after the election, she may have had a better chance of winning, and then formed her statement to appear concerned about playing fairly.

Baker sponsored four bills in the 1945 session which passed and became law. Two strengthened the State Railroad Commission, one regulated optometry, and the fourth increased the pensions of teachers and school superintendents who had served thirty-five years or more. These general bills did not get her re-elected in the campaign of 1946, possibly because of an unkept local promise to lower power rates.⁴⁶ The *St.*

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Morris, 419.

Petersburg Times noted at the time, “Voters have long memories.”⁴⁷ Many politicians and newspapers understood the importance of a close relationship with the local community and keeping the voting constituency prosperous, something Edna Pearce would be sure to accomplish.

Women who ran for political office generally had some, if not major, experience in public service before they were elected. Most worked through church organizations, women’s groups, or business groups. Edna Giles Fuller had worked for twenty years as a leader in public committees, community boards, and women’s clubs. She was the first president of the League of Women Voters in Florida. Mary Lou Baker worked indexing the House journal after receiving her law degree. Of all the Florida women legislators elected to office, many had prior experience serving locally on planning boards and school boards. Some gained leadership experience through business enterprises. Several of the women who ran for office had very strong father figures urging them forward. Edna Pearce, always a “daddy’s girl,” would arrive in Tallahassee with a great deal of public service, business experience, and community and family ties throughout the state. She also understood the importance of keeping her constituency prosperous and satisfied with the attention Highlands County would receive from the state.

⁴⁷ Morris, citing *St. Petersburg Times*, 22 April 1944.

CHAPTER 4:

LADY OF THE HOUSE

In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man.

If you want anything done, ask a woman.

Favorite saying of Margaret Thatcher

During the thirties and forties, Edna Pearce assisted her father in managing the P-4 cattle ranch. Her father, Sidney, died in 1944 and Edna continued to run the ranch on her own. She had inherited an interest in politics from her father¹ as well as an ability to manage the ranch. Her niece, Evelyn, recounted, “They [the Pearce family] liked politics. They all liked politics, even Aunt Pearl . . . she was the state delegate for the presidential elections and all.”² The Pearce women could afford to travel and attend meetings as far away as Washington, D.C. and that was one reason that they could pursue positions such as “presidential delegate.” Edna herself was active in the local Democratic Party.

Edna Pearce’s home was situated halfway between Sebring and Okeechobee so she spent quite a bit of time on the road for business, social, and political reasons. The only other option was to flag down the passing train that ran between Sebring and Okeechobee which passed about a mile from her home.³ Evelyn recalled, “She just had a dirt road to come back and forth. She’d get stuck, and if the car broke down she was way

¹ Jennie Reninger, “The Honorable Lady,” *All Florida Magazine*, 31 July, 1953.

² Evelyn and Charles “Dan” Johnson, interview by author, CD, 20 June 2007, Sebring, FL.

³ *Ibid.*

out in the boondocks.”⁴ Her neighbor, R.E. Thomas, remembered what life was like for country people before the road was paved:

It was an all day job to go to town and back. Okeechobee, we used to go to Okeechobee. You didn’t go every day. You’d go once a week or every two weeks. You didn’t have any money to spend and you didn’t really need a lot, so you’d go on Saturday and that was a big social event. See, people, everybody from the whole area would come to Okeechobee, sit down and talk, go buy groceries and your feed for your animals, livestock . . . out in the park . . . ask how their crops were or how their children [were doing] . . .⁵

The trip to town, be it Sebring or Okeechobee, was so tough that people did not leave their homes unless they were on necessary business, and once they arrived, they stayed as long as possible to make the trip worthwhile.

Even though Edna and her sister, Pearl, lived out in the middle of cattle country, they were reared as elites, especially when contrasted with most of the people of Highlands County. For example, in 1938 Edna and Pearl traveled to Atlanta for the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*. Edna thought nothing of traveling to New York City on shopping expeditions. Dan Johnson recalled the situation this way: “She had a sense of privilege, I think; I mean she grew up where she pretty much had anything she ever wanted. I mean her family had cows, and so I think sometimes she didn’t quite really relate to things that went on out in the world because she grew up a little differently, you know.”⁶ If your family owned a large cattle ranch, you had choices other women did not.

In the late forties, Edna Pearce attempted to meet with her banker in Wauchula at 10:00 A.M. in the morning (an hour’s drive today). Knowing that the road conditions were poor, she left home at 5:00 A.M. and did not arrive in Wauchula until 4:00 P.M.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Beedie Mae Thomas and R.E. Thomas, interview by author, videotape, September 11, 2006, Okeechobee.

⁶ Johnson interview.

because the roads were so bad. “It was then that she decided something needed to be done about the lack of proper roads in Highlands County.”⁷ Before returning home, she visited Charlie Lanier of Avon Park, a distant relative and state representative, and discussed a possible run for the House of Representatives in Tallahassee. Edna Pearce recalled, “He encouraged me to run, so I pointed to a hat I was wearing and said, ‘See this hat, I’m going to throw it in the ring.’”⁸ With his encouragement and her promise to pave State Road 98, she ran unopposed with the slogan, “Put a woman in the House.”

She was elected to the 1949 Florida State Congress where she kept her promise to pave State Road 98 which connected everything and everyone from Sebring and Fort Basinger (Highlands County) to Okeechobee (Okeechobee County). State Road 98 connected the two counties and changed life in Fort Basinger in many ways. From school buses to cattle trucks, life could be re-thought with the new road, which made a trip that previously had taken all day long to one that could be made in an hour. The telephone company installed service to the Ft. Basinger area shortly after the government paving project, and communication between the townsfolk and the Ft. Basinger area improved overnight.⁹

Even though Pearce always asserted that she went to Tallahassee to get her road paved, according to newspaper accounts at the time, she had other ideas about what she wanted to accomplish while in the legislature. A 1949 article described Pearce standing in the inaugural stand of Gov. Fuller Warren: “[She] is conscious of her position as defender of her sex in Florida’s law making body.” The paper reported two gender issues on which

⁷ “She Stood Before Kings,” *Lake Placid Journal*, 28 March 1985.

⁸ Dave Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit Is Part of Her Legacy,” *Tampa Tribune*, 12 January 1981.

⁹ Johnson interview.

Pearce hoped to work. “One thing she wants to see accomplished is legal recognition of women as people, which will lead to their being entitled to serve on Florida juries.”¹⁰ When asserting she would like to see equal pay for equal work, they quoted Pearce herself, “As things are, a woman often receives less money for doing exactly the same work.” She added, “And for a woman to win an executive position, she has to be far more outstanding than a man who gets a similar job.”¹¹ Her niece, Evelyn Johnson, recalled, “She just thought women didn’t have enough rights, I guess. She just didn’t see why men served on juries and women couldn’t. She was trying to help women.” Johnson added, “She had to live in a man’s world and she wanted to be accepted, and she wanted other women to be accepted.”¹² She would be successful in getting women on juries, but unsuccessful in securing equal pay for equal work. The paper also reported that Edna Pearce “would not commit herself on the request for fences, designed to hem in Florida’s cattle and keep them off the highways, which has been proposed by Warren.”¹³ She would eventually decide in favor of fencing; however, in 1949, at least, she evaluated both sides of the question, as did her constituency. In the course of time one of her campaign slogans would be, “My cows are fenced.”¹⁴

Pearce’s re-election campaign slogan, “Keep the Lady in the House” must have worked because her constituency re-elected her two more times so that she served in the 1951 and 1953 House sessions. Evelyn remembered doing mailings out of her house and

¹⁰ “Woman to Be in Legislature, Miss Pearce Plans Her Program,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 5 January 1949.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Johnson interview.

¹³ “Woman to Be in Legislature . . .”

¹⁴ Johnson interview.

Pearce using “Keep the Lady in the House” as a subsequent campaign slogan.¹⁵ Dan Johnson, Evelyn’s son and Pearce’s nephew, remembered as a kid seeing his aunt get a parade of people to campaign with her. “I just remember her doing a caravan through the county. I think they drove [to] Avon Park, Sebring, Lake Placid . . . People’d have placards, hold ‘em up, and then they’d, I think, they’d stop at a certain place and make speeches, maybe, and then take off again and go through neighborhoods honking . . .,” he recalled.¹⁶

Edna Pearce served from 1949 through 1953 on the following committees: Citrus, Livestock, State Institutions, Roads and Transportation, and the Appropriations Committee.¹⁷ The 1951 session “approved a plan to set up an alcoholics’ hospital at Avon Park;”¹⁸ however, not without much controversy. Edna Pearce backed the hospital from the beginning and eventually gained credit for establishing the Avon Park Alcoholics Hospital. A local newspaper reported, “The 1951 legislature authorized establishment of an alcoholics hospital at Avon Park and nearly \$500,000 has accumulated from a special liquor tax to finance it, but the institution has not been built because of disagreement over its effectiveness.”¹⁹ The cabinet of Gov. Warren refused to release the money even though many senators pressured them to do so. Editorials in some local newspapers decried the expenditure with statements such as: “Research has not shown that alcoholic centers have proved of real value in the fight against alcoholism,” and “Because of grave doubts concerning its potential effectiveness, state officials wisely

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ House Resolution #1035, Florida House of Representatives, 2 May 1983.

¹⁸ David E. Smiley, “Need for Alcoholic Center Not Satisfactorily Proved,” *St Petersburg Times*, June 3, 1951.

¹⁹ “Avon Park Tries Again for Hospital,” newspaper clipping, Sebring Historical Society, 15 May 1951.

refused to turn loose accumulated funds for construction of the authorized alcoholics' hospital."²⁰

Senator W.A. Shands of Gainesville introduced a modified bill to the Senate and Reps. Pearce and Atkinson introduced the same in the house. The bill that passed both houses would cost no more than \$250,000, and rather than being a 500-bed hospital for alcoholics, it would be a 50-bed clinic. One newspaper stated, "Admission to the clinic would be entirely voluntary and the patients could leave whenever they desired." It continued, "It would serve more as a research laboratory for study of alcoholism and methods of treatment rather than as a hospital."²¹ There would be other clinics in other sections of the state. Pearce appeared to have changed her position along with the other representatives. *The Tampa Tribune* quoted Edna Pearce as having told the House, "Highlands County authorities now realize the hospital plan was unwise and are backing the alternate rehabilitation center proposal."²² After the bill passed the House unanimously, she "jokingly invite[ed] her colleagues to take advantage of its facilities."²³

Edna Pearce brought important people and positive attention to her home county of Highlands. In April, 1952 Highlands and Okeechobee Counties joined together to "put on a big feed at Fort Basinger to celebrate the completion of the extension of Road 700 from Lorida to the Kissimmee River."²⁴ The local newspaper predicted the arrival of thousands of people and "a new bridge will be built across the river to join the new

²⁰ David E. Smiley, *Tampa Daily Times*, editorial, 3 June 1951.

²¹ "Senate Passes Bill To Authorize State Alcoholics Program, Avon Park Clinic," *Tampa Tribune*, 28 May 1953.

²² "House Members Invited—Avon Park Alcoholics Center Bill Clears State Legislature," *Tampa Tribune*, 2 June 1953.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Road Completion to Be Celebrated: Barbecue to Be Held April 23 At Fort Basinger," *Highlands County News*, 11 April 1952.

highway link from the river to Okeechobee.”²⁵ The final lines of the article stated that Gov. Warren Fuller, his cabinet members, and other state and county officials would be invited by Sen. James W. Moore and Rep. Edna Pearce.²⁶ Initially she traveled to Tallahassee to pave State Road 98, but that was just the beginning of the improvements she accomplished for Ft. Basinger—the new bridge and new roads. She understood the importance of keeping her constituency satisfied.

In 1953 the House and Senate Health Committees reviewed the Florida Milk Commission’s ability to fix milk prices. Edna Pearce served as chairman of the House committee and presided over the joint session of the House-Senate committees on public health. Those for and against the milk commission attended a public hearing on 29 April 1953. People jammed into Senate Room 31 as both sides argued their points. The House bill “which would virtually put the Milk Commission out of business by stripping it of its price fixing powers,”²⁷ countered the Senate bill (that Governor McCarty supported) which would “give consumers more representation on the Commission.”²⁸ Journalist John Henderson wrote in an editorial, “Miss Pearce, as you have probably learned from the papers, is a woman of intelligence and ability, has ideas of her own and the courage to fight for them.” He continued, “And, being a women [*sic*], she has no doubt given much thought to the consumer viewpoint of the milk situation.” Later Henderson predicted, “It is therefore quite likely that while Miss Pearce will preside impartially over her committee she will, when the time comes, line up with the great majority of Florida

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Session Called April 29 in Capital; Public Hearing Scheduled On Milk Commission,” undated newspaper clipping, Pearce Papers, Sebring Historical Society, 1953.

²⁸ Ibid.

women who believe they are paying too much for milk and that the price would be less if the State Milk Commission were stripped of its power to fix the price.”²⁹ According to several newspaper accounts, Edna Pearce stated that people in Highlands County were “mad” about the recent hike in milk prices.³⁰ Despite the fact that her Highlands County constituency was angry over the price of milk and despite the prediction of John Henderson that Pearce would vote as a woman, when the votes were tallied, Edna Pearce voted, as did her fellow representatives, to pass the Senate bill which changed the make-up from one consumer, three dairy representatives, and three state officers to three consumers, two dairy representatives, and two state officers. The bill passed 35 to 0 with an amendment (passed 18 to 16) which allowed schools and charities to buy milk on the open market. Thus the public had more representation on the commission; however, the Milk Commission retained its power to fix milk prices. An editorial in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* cautioned, “The type of men he [Governor McCarty] appoints to the new commission will largely determine whether the consumer gains full benefit from the hobbles the legislature has placed on the Sacred Cow.”³¹

The milk issue, though an interesting facet of Florida history, more importantly provided another glimpse into the novelty of having a woman representative in the House

²⁹ John Henderson, “Milk Price Fixing Powers Hearing Set,” undated and un-named newspaper article in Pearce Papers, Sebring Historical Society. The year 1953 was hand written on the clipping.

³⁰ Jim Powell, “Milk Board Bitterly Denounced and Stubbornly Defended In Hearing On Bill To Abolish It.” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 April 1953. Those for the House bill and against the minimum price fixing ability of the commission argued that the commission was created during the Depression, that it was unnecessary in 1953, and destroyed competition and initiative. Florida’s minimum prices of 25 and 27 cents were compared to prices as low as 19 cents a quart in other states. Dairymen defended the higher price in Florida by arguing that Florida had the highest level of butterfat (at 4 percent) compared to other states with 3.25 percent butterfat. Those supporting the commission, like the Florida Dairy Association and the Florida Milk Producers Association, stated that dairymen needed some guarantee to keep the industry afloat and to maintain the quality of Florida’s milk supply. When asked if the price of fish should be fixed, dairyman Dick Dressell replied, “When you don’t need fish you don’t have to catch any. But when you have got cows letting down milk you have got to take it whether you want it or not.”

³¹ “The Consumer Wins,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 May 1953.

in Tallahassee and the assumptions that arose. Because she was female, it was often assumed that Pearce would vote “as a woman” instead of on the issues. Henderson’s statement that Pearce “is a woman of intelligence and ability” highlighted an example of nuanced bigotry. He voiced no opinions about the intelligence or ability of any of the male representatives; nor was it assumed that the male representatives would vote with the masculine dairymen. At the end of this particular issue, Pearce had voted in a compromise with the rest of her male colleagues. She acquitted herself well as the chairman of the Health Committee while confronting a particularly challenging issue.

The one bill Pearce supported that failed to pass was the bill for equal pay for equal work regardless of gender. In 1953 the issue came to the forefront of Florida politics. The Florida Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs urged the passage of the bill at their annual convention where four hundred business women met.³² Two members of the House spoke for the bill, Edna Pearce being one of them. After reminding the House that the Florida Business and Professional Women’s Club supported the bill, she concluded with the admonition, “The eyes of the women of Florida are upon you tonight.”³³ Representative Ayres of Marion County who opposed the bill as a “dangerous thing” argued, “Any woman in your employ could file a complaint before the State Industrial Commission simply by contending that she is doing the same work as a man.” He continued the fear tactic, “She can haul you up before the Industrial Commission and put you to the expense of hiring lawyers to defend yourself.”³⁴ He

³² Jean Yothers, “Women Ask Equal Pay Legislation,” un-named Orlando newspaper clipping, May 1953, Sebring Historical Society.

³³ “House Beats Bill for Equal Pay for Sexes,” *Florida Times-Union*, 29 May 1953.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

concluded, “If you lose, she gets all back pay and you have to pay all attorneys’ fees.”³⁵ Ayres’s arguments won the day and the House defeated the bill by a vote of thirty-four to forty-five. Edna Pearce later stated this was the one defeat in her service in Tallahassee that she regretted the most. *Heartland Tribune* reporter Dave Nicholson interviewed Pearce in 1981 and wrote, “Lockett’s major disappointment was that she never got an equal pay for women bill through the Legislature.”³⁶ The federal *Equal Pay Act of 1963* would later provide equal pay protection for the women of Florida as well as the rest of the country.³⁷

While many important political decisions appeared before the legislature, the mood was not always serious. The members of the State House in Tallahassee exuded self-deprecating humor that we probably would not see today. The House demonstrated their sense of humor in a satire titled, “Third House” which was played out at the end of the 1953 session in the capitol, and Edna Pearce played a major part in the production. Jennie Reninger described the event in her “Tallahassee Tattletale” column as “a riot from beginning to end.”³⁸ It began with the governor escorting his wife, who “turned out to be the most robust member of the House bedecked in hat, veil, and a figured frock featuring an accentuated bosom.”³⁹ After a speech from Governor McCarty, “a bill was introduced to build a turnpike between North and South Miami” which was amended with “Brooklyn” being substituted for the word “North” since “it was pointed out there

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit.”

³⁷ Equal Pay Act of 1963, Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, vol. 29, sec. 206-6.

³⁸ Jennie Reninger, “Mimicry in Tallahassee,” *Highlands County News*, 29 May 1953.

³⁹ Ibid.

was a close reciprocity between Brooklyn and Miami Beach.”⁴⁰ Edna Pearce, “a buxom blond with bulging biceps,” objected to any turnpike that did not run through Ft. Basinger. The bill was amended to run through every member’s county and then passed unanimously. Another bill passed that allowed each member two secretaries, either blond, brunette, or redhead. One member was accused “of having his wife, six sisters, seven brothers, nine aunts, ten uncles, fifteen of his twenty-one children and thirty six cousins on his payroll.” The member then “staunchly denied having cousins on his county payroll.” An efficiency expert spoke to the group and recommended that the legislature be abolished. Soon after a delegation of “bathing beauties” from the Senate was “promptly augmented by the beauties of the House (Members complete in wigs, high heels, and afternoon frocks) and a beauty contest followed.”⁴¹ Later Edna Pearce played the part of Sergeant-at-Arms “replete in uniform red pistol, and enormous white daisy badge.”⁴² According to Reninger the “finest piece of mimicry” came from the Speaker pro-tem when he delivered “a tirade against raising the pay of cotton pickers, ending his speech by falling prostrate from exhaustion.”⁴³ After adjourning, they reconvened at the “Country Club.”⁴⁴

One of the most important days in the life of Edna Pearce occurred on Saturday, 2 May 1953 when she dedicated the William Sidney Pearce Bridge, “concrete with steel drawn span,”⁴⁵ that replaced the wooden bridge which crossed the Kissimmee River in front of the Pearce Homestead. Originally a river crossing for settlers and Seminoles

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Dedication of Kissimmee River Bridge Saturday,” undated newspaper clipping, Pearce Papers, Sebring Historical Society.

alike, Pearce's grandfather operated a ferry across the river at this same location. Her father had built the wooden bridge. The Sebring newspaper led with, "I dedicate this bridge to the memory of my father, William Sidney Pearce." It then described the occasion: "In a voice filled with emotion, and with tear-dimmed [*sic*] eyes because of the joyous and also solemn occasion, Miss Edna Pearce of Fort. Basinger, Highlands County's representative in the state legislature, uttered those words."⁴⁶ Jennie Reninger informed her readers that Edna Pearce "as a shy little country girl, used to collect tolls at the first bridge to span the Kissimmee," and then stated, "It will be the realization of a dream and a big moment in Edna Pearce's life."⁴⁷

The dedication of the bridge became a community and family affair. According to local newspaper clippings, "Everyone interested is invited to attend"⁴⁸ the free barbeque at noon and the dedication ceremony at three o'clock in the afternoon. The Rev. Earl J. Jones of the Okeechobee Methodist Church gave the invocation, Gov. Daniel McCarty sent a representative, and "over 1500 people from far and near" attended.⁴⁹ The Governor's brother, Brian McCarty, did attend as well as senators, representatives, and former Gov. Doyle E. Carlton. Gov. McCarty and former Gov. Fuller Warren sent telegrams of regret. The free barbeque at noon included pork, beef, chicken and rice "and the trimmings," and was "served under the shady oak trees on the old Ft. Basinger School grounds."⁵⁰ After dinner, "Miss Pearce cut the white satin ribbon stretched across the 420-foot structure," then "a procession of cars, with horns blaring, went over the

⁴⁶ "New Bridge Dedicated to Highlands Pioneer: Named in Memory of W.S. Pearce, Developer of Area," *Highlands County News*, 8 May 1953.

⁴⁷ Jennie Reninger, "Lobbying Like Courting Women, Jennie Writes," *Highlands County News*, 1 May 1953.

⁴⁸ "Dedication of Kissimmee River."

⁴⁹ "New Bridge."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

bridge.”⁵¹ The accompanying photo shows a smiling Edna Pearce cutting the ribbon with two little girls and three little boys (probably Pearce’s grandnephews) in front and many more people behind her. The newspaper identified the girls as Sidney Pearce’s great-granddaughters (Pearce’s grandnieces) and the others as “other members of the Pearce family.” The *Tampa Tribune* estimated the cost of the bridge to be “well over \$500,000.”⁵² The county of Okeechobee volunteered a bronze plaque to be placed on the new bridge with the inscription: “This plaque, placed here by the citizens of Okeechobee County, is lovingly dedicated to Miss Edna Pearce, one of Florida’s finest ladies, who [sic] untiring efforts and devotion to duty were largely responsible for the erection of this bridge.” The District engineer presented the old marker from the “retired” wooden bridge to “Miss Pearce.”⁵³

Newspaper accounts of the day made clear that both Highlands and Okeechobee Counties, the state government, and the locals all honored the Pearce family and appreciated what Edna Pearce and her Pearce ancestors had done for past and present residents of the area. “This new bridge is important to this area because it opens up one of the oldest sections of the county for ranching and farming.”⁵⁴ The Pearce family had a long history of public service to their local community and the completion of the road and the new bridge opened up the Ft. Basinger community to electricity, phone service, and made the connection from Sebring to Okeechobee complete. Edna Pearce succeeded in attaining her original goal in paving her community’s main road, and achieved laws

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hayden Williams, “Pearce Bridge Dedicated at Ft. Basinger,” *Tampa Tribune*, 3 May 1953.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Officials to Be Present: Dedication Rite Today For New Pearce Bridge,” undated newspaper clipping, Pearce Papers, Sebring Historical Society, 1953.

that allowed women to serve on juries, laws that instituted clinics for the treatment of alcoholics, and fairer representation on the state's milk commission.

CHAPTER 5:
GENDER AND THE LEGISLATURE

*Amo, amas,
I love a lass,
As a cedar tall and slender;
Sweet cowslip's grace
Is her nominative case,
And she's of the feminine gender!*

John O'Keeffe
from *The Agreeable Surprise*

Once elected to Tallahassee, Edna Pearce became the only female legislator and as such, became well-known and the subject of many local newspaper articles which always mentioned her gender in one way or another. The first “story” revolved around the Speaker of the House beginning each session by addressing the members as “Gentlemen of the House.” After Pearce “reminded the Speaker of the House that there was a lady present,” he henceforth called the sessions together with the phrase, “Lady and Gentlemen of the House.” The press, her colleagues, indeed, even her own attaché treated Pearce as a novelty even though she was preceded by two other woman, one as recently as 1946.

The women who knew Pearce well remembered both men and women in the state accepting her as a legislator. Her niece stated, “They [women] admired her very much.

Everywhere we went people made a big fuss over her, you know.”¹ She then added, “They’d knock each other down to try to get to her sometimes.” As for the men, Evelyn asserted, “I think they had a lot of respect for her, for the most part.”² Audrey Vickers agreed, “She was embraced, as I said, this was the state [in which] she was the Outstanding Cattleperson of the Year.”³ Colleagues accepted Pearce because of her family, whose influence and standing came as a result of owning one of the largest cattle ranches in the state over many years.

While journalists, representatives, and the general public held what would today be considered sexist views about women in general and female politicians in particular, Edna Pearce and her attaché, Jennie Reninger, promoted Pearce’s uniqueness as a woman in a man’s political world at every opportunity. Before joining Pearce in Tallahassee, Jennie Reninger wrote a local column entitled “Tattletale” for *The Highlands County News* in which she used her “inimitable style” to write about whatever was on her mind. For the 1953 session of the Florida House, Edna Pearce requested that Reninger leave Highlands County and journey to Tallahassee as her attaché and Reninger excitedly accepted. As well as serving as Pearce’s assistant, she wrote a weekly feature entitled “Tallahassee Tattletale” in *The Highlands County News* reporting on political life in Tallahassee. Pearce and Reninger demonstrated through this column that they could and would use Pearce’s gender to her advantage.

Rather than downplay Pearce’s femininity, her attaché emphasized it quite often. One of the first “Tattletale” articles described Reninger’s worry over her own wardrobe

¹ Evelyn and Charles “Dan” Johnson, interview by author, CD, 20 June 2007, Sebring, FL.

² Ibid.

³ Audrey Vickers, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

when “The Lady in the House has a reputation of being among ‘the best dressed.’” Later in the article Reninger described her first meeting with Pearce by stating, “Never have I seen The Lady look so good. She was wearing a terribly businesslike navy blue suit and earrings that will go beautifully with my best borrowed black.”⁴ Reninger consistently wrote in her column about Pearce’s wardrobe and sense of style as well as her distinctive place as the sole female legislator. She explained how Pearce, as the only female, had a special duty the day after Representative D.C. Jones died. “There was not a dry eye in the room as our Edna returned to her seat after placing a little bouquet of roses Minnie Bess [another secretary] had given her, together with her own orchid, on the vacant desk of her deceased colleague.”⁵ Besides using dramatic prose, Reninger wrote her column in a style that was self-deprecating while highlighting the positive traits of her boss. Pearce obviously approved of the way Reninger portrayed her since she had hired her to join her in Tallahassee, and they worked together on a daily basis. Perhaps Pearce understood the value of image making and good press and hired Reninger as more of a press agent than an attaché. Reninger’s column appeared every week in the Highlands County newspapers which provided Pearce with nothing but good press for her constituents.

Another example of Pearce’s femininity playing a major role in her public image comes from an article by Maurine Merrick, “Democrat Staff Writer,” for the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Beginning with the statement, “Behind baskets of roses, gladiolas, iris, and other spring flowers banked on her desk, Miss Edna Pearce sat yesterday and answered

⁴ Jennie Reninger, “Tallahassee Crowded, But Jennie ‘Gets Settled,’” *Highlands County News*, Sebring Historical Society newspaper clipping, Spring, 1953.

⁵ Jennie Reninger, “Jennie Has New Post: Tallahassee Mail Carrier,” *Highlands County News*, Sebring Historical Society newspaper clipping, spring, 1953.

the roll call for her third term in office”⁶ The very next paragraph would not appear in many, if any, news articles about male representatives. It reported, “She was dressed in navy blue, with a short cape, small Lily Dache hat and veil with blue dots.”⁷ It continued, “Plain blue opera pumps, a trim handbag, a heavy gold bracelet and gold earrings completed a costume which was suitable for a woman in politics and yet remained utterly feminine.”⁸ It concluded, “Perhaps this was due to Miss Pearce’s excellent posture and graceful carriage.”⁹ In 1953 the public expected women who espoused equality for women to be feminine, poised, graceful, dress well, and be “utterly feminine.” The article in question covered the facts that Pearce raised cattle, served in Tallahassee, and backed the construction of the new William Sidney Pearce Bridge. When introducing Pearce as cattle rancher, the writer began with the phrase, “Still more astounding . . .” because in the time period women were not expected to be capable of running a cattle ranch, serving in the legislature, and maintaining that “utterly feminine” look. Her own press touted her femininity, style, and Pearce as an amazing anomaly instead of an example of as a role model for all women. The amazement with which the press greeted Pearce’s accomplishments highlighted the inequities experienced by most women in the 1940s and 1950s.

Even though she always emphasized Pearce’s abilities as a representative, Jennie Reninger wrote her column with a great deal of self-deprecating humor about her own abilities. When describing her new job, she stated, “Now I find I’m an attaché. This I

⁶ Maurine Merrick, “New Bridge Honors Father: Miss Pearce Legislates and Raises Cattle,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 8 April 1953.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

suspect is French for flunky.”¹⁰ When beginning the job she stated, “To date I have a desk without any drawers and a lot of important papers I’m supposed to keep locked up in them.”¹¹ Another time she attended Citrus and Governmental Re-Organization hearings and revealed the fact that she only observed and therefore, “I did not have to worry my weary brain about whether three or five concentrate was best or whether the governor or the comptroller should collect taxes.”¹² Reninger may have been playing the average woman to Pearce’s super woman. By downplaying her own intelligence, Pearce’s intelligence shone in comparison.

Photographs of Edna Pearce during her Tallahassee days always presented her as a chic and feminine woman of her time. She purchased her clothing at Mrs. Albritton’s in Lakeland, Moss Brothers in Tampa, and on trips to New York City where she would attend Broadway plays and shop.¹³ A 1949 photograph showed Pearce with white gloves, a plumed hat, and a mink jacket.¹⁴ A photograph from the inaugural celebration of Gov. Warren Fuller showed her in the same mink jacket, holding white gloves and a small satin purse, wearing a pearl necklace, with her makeup perfect. The caption introduced “Miss Edna Pearce” as “One of the distinguished guests,” and stated she “holds the distinction of being the only feminine member of the State Legislature.”¹⁵ The photograph that accompanied the Merrick article in 1953 showed Edna “surrounded by flowers sent by Highlands County,” posed standing in front of what appears to be a

¹⁰ Reninger, “Tallahassee Crowded .”

¹¹ Reninger, “Jennie Has New Post.”

¹² Jennie Reninger, “Visit of Lake Placid Kids Makes Jennie Homesick,” *Highlands County News*, 22 May 1953.

¹³ Johnson interview.

¹⁴ “Woman to Be in Legislature.”

¹⁵ Sebring Historical Society, an uncited page from the Edna Pearce Lockett papers. Edna’s photo is located just below the governor and the first lady’s photo in their receiving line.

mantel, hands folded in front with a large corsage and an even bigger smile. One group photo of Pearce with her fellow legislators showed her standing arm-in-arm with jewelry, hat, and pumps in place. She was as tall, if not taller, than many of her male counterparts which may have been another reason she needed to stress her femininity.¹⁶

Reninger always placed Pearce in a positive light. Whether discussing the work in Tallahassee or Pearce's stylish dress, she made sure the constituency understood how important the voters were to Pearce. When a group of school children arrived from Lake Placid [Pearce's district] Reninger wrote in her column, "Since anyone from Highlands rates just above the governor with The Lady, we dashed out to the college to see them as soon as we heard they had arrived in Tallahassee."¹⁷ In another column Reninger stated, "You have to go to Tallahassee to realize how Edna Pearce puts Highlands on the map." She added, "As the only lady in the House of Representatives she is addressed literally hundreds of times every day. Every time a member gets up to speak he begins, 'Mr. Speaker, Lady and Gentlemen.'" Reninger concluded, "As a result, The Lady is pointed out, photographed, interviewed and televised"¹⁸ When Reninger and Edna visited the ailing Governor Dan Mc Carty, Reninger pointed out that they discussed cattle before anything else¹⁹ which must have pleased Edna's constituency of cattle ranchers.

The fact that Highlands County had a representative in Tallahassee society provided the residents of Highlands with a connection to their state government, as well as a feeling of importance. Highlands County now enjoyed a high profile with a famous representative from one of their earliest families who could handle anything Tallahassee

¹⁶ Sebring Historical Society, Pearce Lockett papers.

¹⁷ Reninger, "Visit of Lake Placid Kids."

¹⁸ Reninger, "Jennie Has New Post."

¹⁹ Ibid.

society could require. According to Reninger, “Wives of the Cabinet members open the social season with a hat and glove reception for literally thousands.” After that, parties occur often where, “Half the time hosts don’t know who their guests are and equally often guests don’t know their host.”²⁰ She stated, “Everybody seems so anxious to impress.”²¹ She described Tallahassee life: “It’s a crazy combination of hard work, orchids, cigar smoke, and steaks. Interesting, amazing, and terribly contagious. Once it gets in your blood—you’re a politician.”²² The Edna Pearce Papers are filled with invitations to parties, barbeques, and receptions in Tallahassee. Reninger defended the social life by explaining the need for it. In a column written toward the end of the legislative session, Reninger stated, “What with the dog track tax, chain stores and turnpike, there have been more disappointment, celebrating, and just plain unadulterated down right hard work this week than I have seen anytime so far this session.”²³ She added, “There are committee meetings from eight to nine in the morning. Then the House convenes until four. Then more committee meetings until almost midnight. The next day they do it all over again.”²⁴ Reninger concluded that because of the hard work nerves were on edge, and reasoned, “If it weren’t for the social affairs where legislators relax and work as hard at playing as they do at legislating, someone would blow their top and upset the applecart.”²⁵

Reninger’s column provided Edna’s constituency and future generations with a view of what political and social life in Tallahassee was like. She stated that only

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Reninger, “Tallahassee Crowded.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Reninger, “Visit of Lake Placid.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Tallahassee “could figure so many reasons for pitching a party—only they call them ‘receptions,’” and then she described the dress code and menus. Reninger observed, “Most affairs are at least hat and glove, and a lot rate tails and tuxedos. There are formal balls and fish fries, minority parties and May Day festivities.” She added, “The Speaker of the House, President of the Senate, and wives of cabinet members all try to outdo each other in the quantity of guests and the quality of entertainment.”²⁶ When discussing the clothing she stated, “I wish you could see some of the frocks at these fancy functions,” and then explained how she had to wear a ten year old black dress and devise from a hat box a draw cord for her black satin handbag, thus creating a kindred spirit with the country constituency back in Highlands County. When Reninger arrived at “The Lady’s” hotel room, she observed, “When she opened the door I was simply bowled over! You should have seen her! She looked perfectly gorgeous in a rose colored gown, and around her shoulders the most beautiful black velvet stole I have ever seen—exactly what I needed myself.” Ever the faithful attaché she concluded, “It was Edna herself who suggested I wear it, and if the night hadn’t kept right on getting hotter and hotter, her mink cape would have been just right for her, like I pointed out.”²⁷

The Reninger columns allowed Pearce’s constituency to glimpse a glamorous lifestyle and to feel part of that lifestyle from their farms and ranches in Highlands County. Reninger’s article from a local magazine praised Pearce’s fashion sense, and her ancestors, as well as extolling Pearce’s sincere feelings for her home. Reninger then wrote, “It is hard to believe this chic, poised individual does not come from Washington or New York, but from Ft. Basinger, which, until recently, was merely an isolated outpost

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

on the Kissimmee River.”²⁸ According to Reninger, the people of Highlands County should be very proud of Edna Pearce who did not look too country. But in the next paragraph, Reninger again reminded the people of Highlands, “It [Highlands] is her home—the land her parents and grandparents helped wrest from the wilderness—from hostile Indians, outlaws and wolves”²⁹ The image Reninger built of Pearce assured the people of Highlands that they were being represented well, and that Edna still retained her country roots. Beedy Mae Thomas, a local cattle woman who had a much smaller ranch and stayed very close to home for most of her life, stated about Pearce, “She was a very common lady though. She didn’t . . . wasn’t sophisticated or anything like that. Just common folk.”³⁰ She explained further, “She could hold her own, but when she was around people like me, she was very common.”³¹ Beedie Mae appreciated that quality of Pearce’s. The Lady of Highlands County had found a place in Tallahassee society, but built her reputation as a country girl at heart, and as a result, the people of Highlands felt that they had a voice in their state government. Reninger’s self-deprecating humor allowed the “country folks” to feel at ease as she described the “city folks.” She always described Edna Pearce, her boss, in the most glowing terms as any publicity agent would do.

When Reninger compared lobbyists to courting beaux, she did so tongue-in-cheek. After explaining that Edna Pearce had to point out who were lobbyists and who were representatives, Reninger stated, “That, dear readers, is when your Little Red Riding

²⁸ Jennie A. Reninger, “The Honorable Lady,” *All Florida Magazine*, 31 July 1953.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Beedie Mae Thomas and R.E. Thomas, interview by author, videotape, 11 September 2006, Okeechobee.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Hood decided she wasn't afraid of The Big Bad Wolf." She then made three observations: "Most lobbyists are ex-legislators, turned professional; Lobbyists do not corrupt legislators, they make it pleasant for legislators to corrupt themselves—and each other; Smart lobbyists apply the same rule courting votes as courting women—they go as far as they dare." Reninger finished her metaphor as always with a tribute to Edna Pearce when she stated, "Incidentally, Tallahassee lobbyists love the one and only lady in the House, and this despite they don't get to first base with her."³² Reninger performed her duties as attaché and press agent extremely well.

³² Jennie Reninger, "Lobbying Like Courting Women, Jennie Writes," *Highlands County News*, 1 May 1953.

CHAPTER 6:

A HAPPY HOME AND MARRIAGE

Then in the marriage union, the independence of the husband and wife will be equal, their dependence mutual, and their obligations reciprocal.

Lucretia Mott

By the time Edna Pearce won her seat in Tallahassee, she was in her early forties and had never been married. There had been some local boyfriends and a couple of serious relationships. Evelyn Johnson, her niece, stated:

Oh, yeah. She was engaged to a doctor from West Virginia or Virginia or something at one time. He was the county health doctor here for a while. She dated him. And I know a couple others, some local, but I won't mention any names. [Laughs] Oh, yeah, she had a big diamond ring. It was kind of a long distance romance. I think he was the county nurse—doctor here for a while, but then he went back to West Virginia. I don't know. I know she did have a, an engagement ring. Let's see, she was in her forties when she married, so she had probably been in her thirties. Oh, oh yeah, but she was not engaged to *this* doctor but he was from New York City and his mother lived out at Mountain Lake just out of Lake Wales. It was an exclusive section. She had friends in Lake Wales, I guess, a college girlfriend and that's probably how she met him. And he died suddenly, and at that time she didn't have a phone out there and I don't know how they got our phone number, but they called us and told us that doctor, I've forgotten what his name was now, had died so could we let her know? And so, my husband and I got in the car and we went out there [half hour drive]. That's the only way we had of letting her know 'cause she didn't have a phone.

After driving out to the homestead and breaking the news to Pearce, Johnson and her husband drove her to the Orlando Airport at top speed due to the short time they had to make the plane on time. Along the way, a patrolman stopped their car. The House of

Representatives tag on Pearce's car and their story of trying to make a plane in order to attend a funeral impressed the patrolman enough to escort them, at top speed, to the airport. Johnson remembered, "Anyway, he died and so she was quite upset over that and . . . so she decided she wanted to do something for herself so she was gonna take a trip to Europe." Johnson continued, "And she went on the *Queen Mary*, and that's where she met him [William Lockett]. And they both sat at the captain's table for dinner, and that's when they got acquainted."¹ William J. Lockett was an English wool importer and lived in London. They could not have come from more different backgrounds—he being a British urbanite who did not drive a car and her being a rural ranch owner who was as comfortable on a horse as speeding down the highway.

Differences aside, they found a connection strong enough to cross the ocean. According to the wedding announcement sent by Mrs. William Gaylord Welles, her mother's sister, Edna Pearce married William Lockett on 22 August 1953 at the Sebring Methodist Church.² Evelyn Johnson stated, "She was married in the afternoon and the reception was there, and oh, it was packed!" She continued, "There were lots of people there and then after that reception, she had another one up in Avon Park at, Charlie Lanier's, well, he was sorta related to us."³ She concluded, "He had a big house on the lake up there, and he had a reception, and they just sorta invited people after the reception to come to that one."

Pearce's main concern that day appeared to be the fact that her new husband did not drive a car and so she tried to teach him to drive before the wedding so that "he could

¹ Evelyn and Charles "Dan" Johnson, interview by author, CD, 20 June 2007, Sebring, FL.

² Wedding announcement, Sebring Historical Society.

³ Johnson interview.

at least drive away from the house when they left on their honeymoon.”⁴ Johnson laughingly recalled, “And so, oh, he got into the driver’s seat and the road was gravel-like and boy he started that car up and those tires squealed! I’ll bet after they got outta sight she took over and drove!”⁵ From all accounts the couple got along pretty well. Audrey Vickers mused, “Well, she had never been married before and she was up in her forties and he was very charming . . . and, of course, he had a wonderful English accent.”⁶

With all that Pearce had accomplished in Tallahassee to bring more equality to the sexes, one of her personal life’s choices may have belied that equality. Once she married, Pearce served in the legislature until the following year when she decided not to run again for the House. She stated, “I decided I would rather have a happy home and marriage than continue in public life.”⁷ While that statement appears somewhat incongruent with her professed ideas on equality, the decision to retire from Tallahassee may have been simply a personal decision made by an older bride who desired to be with her new husband in London. The release of the statement engendered positive press and kept with the image of Pearce Lockett as an agent of gradual change between the sexes. Whatever the actual reason for her retirement from Tallahassee, she did continue in public life in different venues. On the day she left the legislature her colleagues demonstrated their respect for her. According to Audrey Vickers, “When she retired from the legislature, they had a great ceremony and walked her down, all of them, behind her in a procession. She led them. It was wonderful.”⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Audrey Vickers, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

⁷ Dave Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit Is Part Of Her Legacy,” *Heartland Tribune*, 12 January 1981.

⁸ Vickers interview.

Pearce Lockett's public life may have ended in Tallahassee, but it re-emerged across the Atlantic. For several years, she lived in London with her husband. During this time Pearce Lockett enjoyed the London lifestyle, met the Queen Mother, and became a member of the Knights of the Garter of Windsor Castle and a Magna Carta Dame.⁹ Upon meeting the Queen Mother Pearce Lockett recalled thinking, "Not bad for a little girl from Ft. Basinger, Florida!"¹⁰ She recounted later, "England was so highly populated and London was so different from Fort Basinger. Nobody there could imagine Fort Basinger." She continued, "During those years I would come back to Fort Basinger every year for six weeks to do the hard ranch work, and then I would be back to London You couldn't have two more different worlds. I didn't know what I wanted."¹¹

Eventually the couple moved back to Fort Basinger, and a few years later William Lockett retired from his London business enterprises. Evelyn Johnson remembered, "She liked it over there, but, you know, her heart was here."¹² Pearce Lockett reflected later about this time, "It's nice to see other parts of the world; there's more to the world than Fort Basinger and I always knew it." She continued, "But after a while you learn there's something special in a place like this. Bill [Lockett] knew that, and he was the one whose idea it was for me to move back to Fort Basinger." She concluded, "When you have something that grows from inside you, you hold to it as long as you can."¹³ Another reason they returned may have been concerns over the operation of the ranch. Charles "Dan" Johnson, Edna's grand nephew, stated, "I think there was also an issue of running

⁹ Audrey Vickers, "Miss Edna, Former Legislator, Honored on Tallahassee Trip," *Sunday News-Sun*, 23 September 1984, 4B.

¹⁰ "She Stood Before Kings," *Lake Placid Journal*, 28 March 1985.

¹¹ Ray Washington, "The Lady of Fort Basinger," *Sebring News*, 27 June 1979, 3C.

¹² Johnson interview.

¹³ Washington, "The Lady."

the ranch and leaving it for long periods of time in the hands of her foreman, and maybe he didn't run it the way she wanted it run."¹⁴ He continued, "I think those were some issues, that she really wanted to be there to oversee it." Johnson concluded, "There's a lotta money there!"¹⁵

Dan Johnson, who is today a middle school principal, spent each summer working at his aunt's ranch beginning in the late fifties and early sixties. The ranch was comprised of three sections with a total of approximately ten thousand acres. One thousand acres surrounded the Pearce home and around twelve hundred acres were located in Glades County. The third section, Fish Branch, was approximately a seven thousand acre section located fifteen to twenty miles from the Pearce homestead near Lake Istokpoga.

Johnson's description of "working cattle" provided a glimpse into the life of a working ranch both before paved roads and after:

They would go out there on Sunday afternoon with trucks and chains and shovels. And they'd have to drive through rough roads to get to where they call Fish Branch. And they would sometimes get stuck, it was so bad. But they'd bring the horses and all the food they needed. They'd stay the entire week because you'd couldn't drive back and forth. It would take too long. So out there in Fish Branch, you had a camp house with a sleeping porch . . . you had pumps where you actually pumped water out of the ground, had an outhouse and you had kerosene lanterns . . . [You'd] round the cows up to brand 'em, you know, and to take care of the little calves. But you'd be out there for the whole week. You'd come in on Saturday morning and uh, take off Sunday and then you'd go back out, if you're still working the cows. You'd go back on Monday. Now . . . the roads were put in and electricity was out there. And so it was a matter of just driving out every day and driving home. It changed that much.¹⁶

Dan remembered "Aunt Edna" would sleep out there and had her own room in the wood framed bunk house. The cowboys slept on the sleeping porch; Pearce Lockett had the

¹⁴ Johnson interview.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

only bedroom; there was a large room where everyone ate and a kitchen. She would sometimes hire a married couple to stay out at the ranch house year round to “watch the place.” He also recollected his aunt may have had a degree in home economics, but always had someone to cook for her at home and at the Fish Branch cabin. Johnson explained:

There was always a cowboy who was like, he would get up before everybody else would get up and he'd get breakfast ready in the old gas stove . . . cook the eggs, the grits, the toast, everything. So by the time everybody got up, they'd sit down and eat. Then he would clean up; then he would start getting lunch ready. And when he got to the point where it [the lunch] was going, he would then go out and work with the cowboys, and then come back before them and put the food on the table. And then after they left to go back out, he'd clean up and get ready for supper. And then go out and work for the cowboys and then turn around and come back. But he was an important person because you wanted to have good food when you came in.¹⁷

The cook may have been an important person on the ranch, but according to her nephew, Pearce Lockett was in charge:

She had a foreman. And the foreman ran the show, so to speak, but she was the boss. I don't know how much she told the foreman to do or not to do, but uh . . . and though she didn't spend every day out there, she came and went. But she ate with the men. She'd go to the cattle pens, I remember, years ago and work the gates and stuff and the cow pens with the men. But she had hands on.¹⁸

Sometimes “Aunt Edna” would be gone from the homestead for a few days and as a boy Dan Johnson would stay on the estate by himself. He described those nights: “The house would settle at night if you were there by yourself, and, you know, there's no noise, [way out in the country] nothing, you could hear the old house settling and creaking and stuff. And when you're twelve or fourteen years old, that's pretty scary

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

stuff.”¹⁹ The house settling was not the only thing that scared the young man. “All those cowboys . . . some of them were rough; some scared me! I didn’t stay much around ‘em.” He recounted, “They had what they called day workers. And if they needed to work cows for a week, they hired. They still do it that way.”²⁰ According to Dan’s mother, Evelyn, today it is easier to pay a man a hundred to a hundred fifty dollars a day because then he has to furnish his own horse, horse feed, and lunch, and the rancher has no responsibility to provide those things and keep horses, saddles, horse feed, and men that are not needed on a daily basis.²¹

Dan Johnson appreciated the fact that the lifestyle of cow men was and is a two-edged sword. On one hand the life of a cowboy was a tough, hard-working job:

It’s a rough life and a lot of those guys work hard and they play hard. And then they die young, a lot of ‘em. Even today. And a lot of those people that work out there, they are poor people. They live from paycheck to paycheck, many of ‘em. Lot of ‘em are married, and probably their wives worked, and a lot of times their goal is to find five or ten acres they can afford. Now a days I don’t see how they could do it, but they have a few cows and animals out there they raise. That’s not unusual. A lot of the ones I knew—they were heavy drinkers. But they were always there, and they worked hard. They’d give you an honest day’s work.²²

However, even though the cowboys lived a rough life, Dan Johnson could remember times when he could understand why someone would choose to work cattle:

I’ll tell you the truth, there’s no better sensation to me than being on a horse at sunrise with eight or ten other cowboys, goin’ out to work when it’s still cool and you can smell the grass and you can smell the horses. It’s a sensation that you won’t know unless you’ve experienced it. But it’s a good sensation to have that feeling. Very few people experience that. And the camaraderie between them . . . it’s a lifestyle people like. But you’re not gonna get rich doing it—unless you’re the owner.²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Johnson reiterated the fact that Pearce Lockett grew up “in a man’s world” on a ranch where she was surrounded by working men.²⁴ She had a strong relationship with her father who believed she had the character to run the ranch after her brother died. She also witnessed strong women who had lived the “Cracker” lifestyle along with male ancestors through many generations. Edna Pearce demonstrated her belief in equality of the sexes and races through her hiring practices on the ranch. Dan Johnson recalled, “When I started working out there she hired girls, women to work, men, and she hired blacks. That was not that common in those days. She hired Seminole Indians.” He added with a laugh, “She believed everybody should have an equal opportunity to make the same low wages!”²⁵

The Seminoles traveled through the Fort Basinger area for hundreds of years, crossing the Kissimmee at the Pearce estate location. An Indian mound stands on one side of the Kissimmee River less than a mile south of the Pearce estate. The Pearces always had a relationship with local Seminoles from the Brighton Reservation. There were even some rumors about John Mizell Pearce fathering Seminole children. Small groups of Seminoles would stop by the homestead unannounced. Evelyn Johnson recalled as a child, “Now I can remember them coming and not knowing they were coming, you know, and we were eating and after we got through eating, they [the adults] had them come in and eat.” Seminoles would visit Edna Pearce from time to time when her friend Audrey Vickers was present. “They stopped here off and on all the time. They’re right spooky when they come,” Vickers stated. “You might be sitting out here in the twilight, first thing you know you hear somebody, and they’ve taken a chair down, and they just

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

sit ‘til they get ready to talk.” She added, “They come to visit or commune with the spirits or something—I don’t know.”²⁶

Edna Pearce grew up with the Seminoles stopping by to visit and working on the ranch. Dan Johnson remembered, “Now, Aunt Edna, her feeling about the Indians was that they really did hate the white man. I mean, she felt like centuries, I mean hundreds of years, that they just . . . I mean she got along with ‘em, they were friends, but as a rule, they did not like what the whites had done to their society, their civilization.” He added that they did respect her and would visit and work for her.²⁷ He also recalled how well the Seminoles worked cattle by asserting, “They make great cowboys. Some of those Indians were great cowboys! Cowboys, Indians, I don’t know if that’s the right thing—that’s an oxymoron or something, but they make great cattlemen. They were good at working cows, great horsemen.”²⁸

While Pearce Lockett supervised the cattle ranch, she and William had close contact with the rest of the local Pearce family and the community at large. By all accounts Edna and William Lockett had a good marriage. He willingly left London once he retired and made Highlands County his home. Evelyn Johnson asserted, “He was very jolly. He was fun to be around, for an Englishman. And she liked to have fun. She loved to have a good time.”²⁹ Audrey Vickers stated, “They liked to entertain and he was very personable. And of course he had a wonderful English accent. [They] got along very well.”³⁰ She always drove and one of the few points of contention between them was his

²⁶ Vickers interview.

²⁷ Johnson interview.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Vickers interview.

ability to get into the car on time. She appeared to be the supervisor in her marriage as well as her ranch.

Dan Johnson observed of William Lockett, “He had a hobby; he loved animals. He loved cats and dogs and he raised and fed a bunch of cats and dogs.”³¹ Evelyn added, “They cooked food for them, maybe wormy grits and old grits and they’d get stuff at the butcher shop that the butchers were gonna throw away.”³² Foreman Junior Miller remembered, “I guess they had forty or fifty head of cats when I started working here [1975] and about thirty some head [of dogs]. They runnin’ everywhere.”³³

After her marriage, Pearce Lockett kept busy with the ranch and civic, political, and social activities. From 1962 through 1970 Edna served on the Highlands County Hospital Board “during which time Highlands County Hospital was constructed.”³⁴ Audrey Vickers asserted, “She did things that women hadn’t done. She was the first woman to serve on the hospital board here.” She added, “The first baby there was her grand niece, Evelyn Johnson’s daughter.”³⁵ From 1970 through 1976, she served as the Chairman of the Highlands County Democratic Committee.³⁶ In 1974 she joined the board of Florida Southern College and headed the alumni association for several years.³⁷

In the early 1970s Pearce Lockett decided to try a new innovation in rounding up cattle—using a helicopter. Reporter Rick Moyer described his ride on the helicopter as it worked the two thousand acre pasture. “It was our job to herd somewhere between 800 and 900 steers and cows across a canal bridge, where cowboys on horseback would then

³¹ Johnson interview.

³² Ibid.

³³ William “Junior” Miller, interview by author, videotape, 11 October 2006, Ft. Basinger, FL.

³⁴ Resolution 1035, Florida House of Representatives, 2 May 1983.

³⁵ Vickers interview.

³⁶ Resolution 1035

³⁷ Vickers, “Honored on Tallahassee Trip.”

meet us and drive the cattle into trucks.” He reported, “The trucks were to go to the Lykes Brothers Meat Packing Plant in Plant City where the contents would be butchered. Those shipped included approximately 150 large grass-fed steers, weighing between 1000 and 1100 pounds, and some of the larger cows.”³⁸ Moyer asked Pearce Lockett why she chose to herd at that time, and she replied, “Prices are up right now, and February is the best time to sell beef cattle in Florida.”³⁹ According to Dan Johnson, “There was a part of the property that was muck and most of the year you couldn’t access it.” He continued, “And the weeds and grass in there was taller than a horse, and there’s cattle that were born, raised, and died in there without ever seeing anybody because you couldn’t get ‘em out.”⁴⁰ Junior Miller, Edna’s foreman, remembered the location for the round-up being about thirteen miles away and, “Then there’s nothin’ but open range there and the helicopter went down around that lake and he blowed ‘em all out to us, and then we made the cattle drive”⁴¹ When asked about the efficacy of the helicopter round-up Junior replied, “It made it a lot quicker because we couldn’t get ‘em in on the lake ‘cause it’s bad down there so you couldn’t get in there with horses. And so ‘course we had dogs, but then that was the quickest way—the helicopter.” Junior did admit, “She used it one year and, uh, she didn’t use it any more. I don’t know what happened.”⁴²

An article in the *Tampa Tribune* explained what happened, “This is primarily because cattle are animals of habit and have gradually become accustomed to loud noises from nearby highway traffic, tractor motors, and the occasional circling of a whirlybird.”

³⁸ Rick Moyer, “Hopalong Chicken Herds Dogies,” uncited article, Sebring Historical Society.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Johnson interview.

⁴¹ Miller interview.

⁴² Ibid.

The article asserted, “such noises don’t spook them like they use to.”⁴³ The newspaper used Pearce Lockett’s ranch as an example of the failed strategy when it reported, “The chopper had been expected to round up the 1,000 head of cattle in about 45 minutes, certainly not more than an hour.” It continued, “The cattle balked, however, and the task took almost three hours [at \$85 an hour]. The helicopter swooshed low over the heads of the herd, its engine roared, and its blades sent waves of cool air over the animals.” Far from being afraid of the helicopter, “They seemed to enjoy it as they looked curiously at the metallic bird and appreciated the coolness of its fan.”⁴⁴ The article concluded with a quote from “Mrs. Lockett” putting a good spin on the whole event, “Like most people, I kind of enjoy watching an old-fashioned roundup, the kind we’ve always associated with the cowboy.”⁴⁵

Audrey Vickers met Edna Pearce Lockett while working for the *Palm Beach Post Times* [now the *Palm Beach Post*] when she was assigned to cover the cattle woman who tried to use a helicopter to herd cattle. According to her, the helicopter operation may have taken more than a day. Vickers recalled, “She was going to work cows from a helicopter and that intrigued my editor, and he thought he’d send a woman reporter out, that intrigued him more. And it was a very wonderful, wonderful, week. They took all week to work cows with helicopters. I don’t know that they ever did it a second time, [laughs] but it got a lot of attention. Well, not so much press attention, but other cattle people coming to see how, how she was doing it.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Bill Cooley, “Copters Losing Ability to Round Up ‘Dogies,’” *Tampa Tribune*, 27 February 1975.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Vickers interview.

R.E. Thomas worked for Pearce Lockett as a ranch hand during this time period. “I worked for her for four years. I was employed by her in the early 1970s.”⁴⁷ He continued, “She was involved in the ranch operation on pretty much a daily basis. I went there every morning, I’d report in to her and tell her what I did yesterday, what I was goin’ to do today and all that.”⁴⁸ He asserted, “The husband didn’t know, have any idea about the cattle business. She was definitely in charge and she knew . . . she was very knowledgeable.”⁴⁹ Regarding fertilizing and pasture improvement, R.E. recalled, “She didn’t do much fertilizing. She did a lot of pasture improvement.”⁵⁰ Dan Johnson asserted, “When you talk about helicopters, she could’ve had some of her property sprayed from the air to kill weed, by air, herbicides, but she didn’t do that because she was afraid that the herbicides would blow over into her neighbors’ property . . . when other ranchers were doing that.”⁵¹ R.E. Thomas remembered Pearce Lockett grazing cattle on the Lake Istokpoga lake bottom before they disallowed cattle to graze there. “She had at one time, I remember, gathering one thousand head of steer off the lake bottom. She carried steers for a long time, grew ‘em out, one thousand, twelve hundred pound steers.”⁵² Pearce Lockett sold her cattle to packers in Miami. “We’d haul ‘em in a truck. They bought ‘em at the pens and hauled ‘em down there.”⁵³ Working for a female boss was not common, but R.E. Thomas stated, “Certainly had no problems. Never had a

⁴⁷ Beedie Mae Thomas and R.E. Thomas, interview by author, videotape, 11 September 2006, Okeechobee.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Johnson interview.

⁵² Thomas interview.

⁵³ Ibid.

cross word. She told you what she thought and she meant it, which ya gotta respect that in anybody.”⁵⁴

The Locketts enjoyed entertaining and did quite a bit of it at their home in Fort Basinger. As the Chairman of the Highlands County Democratic Executive Committee from 1970 through 1976, Pearce Lockett received many visitors that either paid their respects to her or asked advice of her. One of the last parties they hosted was the 1976 Bicentennial Gala Barbeque at the estate. According to Audrey Vickers:

She had a huge party. Took place here and at the schoolhouse grounds on the other side. [points toward State Highway 98] And I think a couple of former governors, there're some clippings also in the records down there. It had a good attendance, a very good attendance. It was an all day affair, and it was a barbeque and a lot of tribute was paid to her, we had a stage set up on the back of a flatbed. It's how we do it out in the country. All of the speakers . . . a lot of Democrats who had worked with her in the legislature. Petits fours, always, [laughs] she loved little tiny pastries, and as I said, they cooked barbeque. It was done by people who were her friends. I don't believe she ever had a caterer. Junior [Miller] and his wife would clean the place up, and then she would . . . a lot of her parties were held out here on the porch before air conditioning. But that was a great day! And it was commemorated in a lot of the Florida and national press because she was the third woman to be elected to the House of Representatives.⁵⁵

Dan Johnson remembered, “They cooked roasts over an open fire. I mean thirty or forty or fifty roasts, huge roasts, a pit, an open fire, with big barrels of corn on the cob, you know, boiled.”⁵⁶ He added, “Lawton Chiles, ‘Walkin’ Lawton,’ he was doing that at that time. He was walking around the state. They had a platform stage built that speakers could step up on and speak.”⁵⁷ Many of the dignitaries attended to pay their respects to the Chairman of the Highlands County Democrat Executive Committee, Edna Pearce

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Vickers interview.

⁵⁶ Johnson interview.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Lockett, who by that time balanced her life between her husband, her ranch, her family, her community and her state.

CHAPTER 7

THE LATER YEARS

*What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?*

William Butler Yeats in *The Tower*

William “Junior” Miller began working for Edna Pearce Lockett in 1975 after his brother-in-law asked him to drive him out to the P-4 Ranch where he was working. Once “Miss Edna” realized Junior had experience working cattle and training horses, she asked him if he would consider a full time job working as her foreman. He recalled Miss Edna saying, “I’ll pay you straight time. You workin’ under me and don’t have no other boss.” She continued, “Well, you’ll go out and work cows and then you’ll come in here and help me. And you don’t have to do nothin’ except do what I tell ya.”¹ Miss Edna was sixty-seven years old at this point and as she aged and her husband William passed away, Junior, a cowboy of African American descent, became more and more important to her as a cattleman, driver, and companion.

Willam Lockett had been diagnosed with cancer and had a kidney removed around the time of the 1976 Bicentennial Gala. Junior remembered, “He was operated on and he was goin’ to the doctor getting’ his checkups, but then, somehow or another, down

¹ Junior Miller, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

the line they musta missed out some way or another, and they [*sic*] was too far gone whenever they found out that that cancer had come back on him.” He continued, “And so they just run from one doctor to another. They tried to do for him, and so they never could help him no more.”² Eventually Lockett became so sick he could not be cared for at home, even though that was where he wanted to be. Dan Johnson remembered:

I’ll tell you how devoted a wife she was to him. I went down there [the estate] having not been there for a couple of weeks and he had gotten so bad. The cancer had gone to his brain. It was affecting his behavior. And she was trying to be a good wife and take care of him and it was about to kill her! And so, I talked to her and told her that you really need to go to the hospital, and she finally gave in and agreed with me and got her foreman, Junior [Miller], I think, to try to get him in the car to take him to the hospital.

Junior Miller recalled William Lockett’s unreasonable request to go home from the hospital when he was so sick:

Cause he’s lookin’ at me to take ‘em home! Because he’s tellin’ my wife, he said, ‘Junior will be here to get me and take me home.’ He, he declared that I was goin’ take him home. But I was sorry about that because I couldn’t take him home. But he thought that I could do anything, you know?³

Junior Miller’s importance to the family and their trust of him was apparent then and continues to this day since he is still the one looking after the Pearce Homestead. William Lockett never did return home; instead he died in 1977 leaving a devastated widow behind.

Miss Edna grieved for her husband and the good times they had had together. Both loved to socialize, enjoyed cocktail hours, and hosted many small and large dinner

² Ibid.

³ Miller interview.

parties. “She used to pay him a visit out there, you know, in the cemetery,” Junior Miller explained. “Like she’d go out there and maybe talk to him, you know, and all that stuff.”⁴

Dan Johnson recalled:

I stayed with her that summer. She was really, was still suffering from it. All those dogs and cats were still there. Every time you opened a door six cats would run out and eight cats would run in. And I’m allergic to cats so that wasn’t too good. It was like she was shell shocked after he passed away. Then, of course, you’re isolated out there. There’s not a lot of people, so you’re lonely.⁵

A year or so after William Lockett’s death Edna may have shown the stress she felt during an incident that everyone who was there remembered. Dan Johnson explained:

This was after he passed. But they were feeding those dogs, I mean, it wasn’t like the dogs needed food. They were just in packs and they had killed a number of her calves, running at night in packs. And uh, I guess she was still in an emotional state from the loss of her husband and the foreman said one morning, ‘The dogs killed another one of your calves. What do you want to do about it?’ I think that’s when she reacted and said, ‘Shoot ‘em.’ And they probably did. But there were circumstances there, under other circumstances, she wouldn’t have done that. She loved animals. She even hated, in her later years, she hated to sell her cows. I mean, because it was a sentimental thing to her, I guess. So she wasn’t the type of person that was cruel to animals. But the combination of the loss of her husband, being in an emotional state, and losing calves, and having fed those dogs so they didn’t need to do that And cowboys, they don’t round dogs up to be euthanized, you know, in those days⁶

The cats continued to roam the estate and not all the dogs were shot. Junior was not the foreman at that time, but he recalled what he saw:

Well, when he died, you know, the pets, the dogs, they would go out and destroy the calves, you know, and they would just bite ‘em in the nose, and they’d kill some of ‘em. And so, we was out workin’ one day, and so, the foreman said, ‘Miss Edna, look at these dogs hidin’ just messed up these calves.’ He said, ‘Junior, here’s another the same way.’ I was doctorin’ up, in the pen. I was

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Johnson interview.

⁶ Ibid.

doctorin' a cow. And uh, she said, 'Well, let's go ahead and just get rid of 'em.' And so, she got mad about it 'cause he kept on talkin' to her about it.

Having buried her husband and aging herself, Miss Edna was increasingly lonely living so far from town so that Junior eventually became someone with whom she could talk, as well as serving as her foreman. Junior's wife worked for Miss Edna at the Bicentennial Gala and at other times when she was needed. The longer Junior and Miss Edna worked together the closer they became. Junior explained, "Course it was good around here all the time because me and her had a good relationship, a workin' relationship that we had. Because she would always get me to go carry, you know, finances to the bank and do a little bankin' for her and some time I would take her and you know, and things like that and we'd have dinner together and come back home. And that's about it."⁷

Junior Miller attested to Miss Edna's kind treatment of people who worked for her. "She treated us nice and when it was cold weather, she didn't want us to go out there and work in cold weather." He continued, "She'd tell the cowboys always to just go home and come back tomorrow, you know. She didn't want 'em to work in the rain or anything like . . . and then some of 'em did, and they done did exactly just what she told 'em not to do and she got angry with 'em."⁸ Junior explained that other employers did not care if the weather was cold. Miss Edna told her employees to stay home with a cold "until you got well," according to Junior.

Junior witnessed many acts of kindness on Miss Edna's part. "She was just a good-hearted person. She was good to lotta peoples." He recalled, "Uh, some people,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

you know, needed finances and she would finance it and help ‘em.” Besides financing some of her neighbors’ endeavors, she seemed to enjoy buying some of her neighbors’ wares whether she needed them or not. “And I know that by me takin’ her around, you know, she’d buy things just to help somebody whether she wanted it or not.” Children appeared to be some of the recipients of her generosity . “She’d see a kid, she’d give ‘em a few dollars, you know, things like that.” Junior asserted, “And I think she loved childrens, but she didn’t have none of her own ‘cause he was too old, you know, they was, at least when they got married, so she was fifty years old [actually forty-five] when they got married.”⁹

Junior Miller stated that some people tried to “run over her” because of her gender, but related, “But they didn’t run over her, I’m gonna put it that way because she was tough! I mean she would stand her grounds!” He added, “And if somethin’ didn’t go right . . . boy! You’d see her kinda doin’ one of these numbers with her foot [taps foot on the floor], she was fixin’ to let somebody know somethin’! She didn’t say good things.” Once the offender had been put in his place, “then she was through with it” and did not hold a grudge. Junior understood, “She had a good brain. If she hadn’t had, she wouldn’t have kept this ranch.”

Although Miss Edna never had children of her own, but was close to her nieces and nephews. Dan Johnson stated, “Like I said, she was the kinda person that she was a family oriented person.”¹⁰ He continued, “I can remember a lot of the good things she did for me growing up.” After seeing one nephew score six points in a football game, she gave the boy six dollars. Dan stated, “Yeah, six dollars was a lot of money in those days .

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Johnson interview.

. . [today] it'd be like getting forty or fifty dollars.” Trying to be fair, “Aunt Edna” told Dan who was a basketball player, “Danny, I gave Jimmy a dollar a point for every point he scored in football. I’ll do the same for you for basketball.”¹¹ The deal inspired the young boy. Dan reminisced, “I was the only kid that year in Florida that was playing professional basketball because every time I made a shot that was two bucks!” He finished the season as the top scorer on his team when his aunt approached him and asked, “You know I promised you a dollar a point, so how many points did you make this year?” Her nephew told her he had scored three hundred and sixty points. She got very quiet for a time then stated:

Well, I’m gonna write you out a check for a hundred dollars. I know in a couple months you’ll need some more money, and I’ll write you out another check. I’m gonna make some payments to you until I’ve paid you off.

She kept her word, but as Dan remembered, “The next year she didn’t make that offer!”

Edna Pearce Lockett had a good sense of humor. Dan Johnson remembered a time when a guy she had hired to mow the yard filled the gas tank with the water hose. Instead of being upset, she thought that was funny especially since the guy she had hired was a bit slow mentally. Perhaps she felt sorry for the man or realized she should have planned his hiring better. Another time one of her employees drove the cattle truck into the canal. Instead of fuming, she asked, “Well, do we have drown insurance?” Dan explained, “There were things that would’ve bothered me that didn’t bother her at all and there were other things that seemed to bother her some, but she always had a good sense of humor.”¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Newspaper articles about Miss Edna appeared every so often during the 1980s. With titles such as “Pioneer Spirit Is Part of Her Legacy” or “Miss Edna, Former Legislator, Honored on Tallahassee Trip” and the rather high-minded “She Stood Before Kings,” Edna Pearce Lockett became the grandame of Highlands history. In 1980 Florida Southern College in Lakeland named Edna Pearce Lockett Honorary Chancellor for 1980. An award bestowed on the school’s most successful graduates, Pearce Lockett joined former Honorary Chancellors such as Bob Hope and Walter Cronkite. The certificate that accompanied the honor read:

With diplomacy and vision you promoted the rights of women while holding high the role of women to provide integrity and a noble quality of life for our nation. From the ranch at Fort Basinger to the royal halls of England, you have been at home with those who toil for humanity, as well as with those who reside in palaces.¹³

In 1983 Representative Bert Harris Jr. (D-Lake Placid) sponsored House Resolution 1035 which honored Edna Pearce Lockett “as the third woman in Florida history elected to the Florida House of Representatives.”¹⁴ Miss Edna traveled to Tallahassee on 2 May 1983 to receive the resolution. Besides her service to the legislature, the resolution listed her other accomplishments which included a list of her committee work, Honorary Chancellor of Southern College, honorary Doctorate of Law Degrees from Southern College and the University of South Florida, membership in the Knights of the Garter of Windsor Castle, chairman of the Highlands County Democratic Committee, nomination to the 1982 Florida Women’s Hall of Fame, and her work on the Highlands County Hospital Board during which time the Highlands County Hospital was

¹³ Dave Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit Is Part of Her Legacy,” *Tampa Tribune*, 12 January 1981.

¹⁴ House Resolution #1035.

constructed.¹⁵ Miss Edna represented Precinct 12 of the Democratic Committee as late as 1984 and declared, “Once you get interested in politics, it gets into your blood. You always stay interested in good government.”¹⁶

During the 1983 trip to Tallahassee Miss Edna, at seventy-five years of age, admired the new legislative building, but enjoyed touring the original building where she served. She could not see her old office because of remodeling that was under way, but she did visit some of the other old offices and walk some of the same halls that she walked when a legislator. Lockett stated, “It is still a beautiful building and it shows out well against the new capital, which is so modern. I’m glad they are saving it.”¹⁷ When asked if she missed it, she replied, “It’s really a lot of responsibility to serve in that office. I’m happy like I am just running my ranch, but I was very honored by the State Legislature.”¹⁸

In 1984 the Florida Women’s Network and the Daughters of the American Revolution nominated Edna Pearce Lockett for the Florida Women’s Hall of Fame. Thirty years after retiring from the legislature Edna Pearce Lockett, accompanied by Evelyn Johnson, Audrey Vickers, and Gladys Vaughn, her housekeeper, drove to Tallahassee in one of her many Cadillacs to receive the award. Vickers recalled, “She could push a button on the dashboard and tell how fast you’d been going, how long you’d been going that fast, how much gas you were using and she was very proud of that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dave Nicholson, “Edna Lockett Returns to Where She Made History, *Heartland Heritage*, 16 May 1983.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

car!”¹⁹ The participants in the road trip enjoyed themselves on the way to Tallahassee. Vickers stated, “She was fun. She liked to eat but she had a good appetite!” When Vickers’s family met them in Ocala for lunch she explained, “We had a table of about ten people. And Miss Edna ordered first . . . and she knew what she wanted.” Vickers continued, “She had two dozen raw oysters and she washed ‘em down with two or three Scotch and waters.” She added, “She had a ball!”²⁰ After checking into a hotel, the ladies enjoyed each other’s company, especially Miss Edna’s. Vickers stated, “If you went somewhere and you stayed in a hotel you knew that you were gonna have a good time because she was gonna tell stories and then she was gonna remember”²¹ Miss Edna epitomized the local spirit of community as she became a living legend.

They traveled to the city to attend a reception to honor all the Florida Women’s Hall of Fame nominees at the Governor’s Mansion hosted by Gov. and Mrs. Bob Graham. Dignitaries that attended the governor’s reception included Lt. Gov. Wayne Mixon²² “who wanted to discuss cattle news” and Allen Morris, former House Clerk who “just wanted to talk about ‘old times.’”²³ Even though Miss Edna was not selected for the Florida Women’s Hall of Fame that year, the event provided Miss Edna with the opportunity to announce her funding of a \$75,000 tower and carillon for the Centennial Plaza and Garden of Presidents at Florida Southern College in Lakeland where she had graduated fifty years before. She told the group that she would name the tower in

¹⁹ Audrey Vickers, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² In 1987 Lt. Gov. Mixon filled the unexpired gubernatorial term of Bob Graham, who became a U.S. Senator.

²³ Audrey Vickers, “Miss Edna, Former Legislator, Honored on Tallahassee Trip,” *Sebring News-Sun*, 23 September 1984.

memory of her parents, and “she explained that her mother, Mellie Virginia Hollingsworth, was a cousin of the first college president, Joshua Hollinsworth.”²⁴ The seventy foot carillon tower and garden honored the fifteen “presidential leaders of the college and commemorate[d] the 100th anniversary of the institution.”²⁵ Dan Johnson described the tower, “It’s an obelisk, straight up, and around the base is a brass plate that indicates her family history of some of the relatives. Lake Hollingsworth—her mother was a Hollingsworth—so it was founded by her family or at least some members of her family founded that college.”²⁶

It was during one of these trips to Tallahassee that Miss Edna’s attitude toward equality for women again became apparent. One Saturday morning Audrey Vickers and Edna attended a Florida Woman’s Network [later Alliance] coffee given by the governor’s wife, Adele Graham, where the governor stated that he’d be glad to appoint a woman to the state Board of Education if they had one that was qualified. Cecelia Bryant, the daughter of a previous governor, Farris Bryant, and member of the group, had her nomination form already filled out and was qualified by her business experience. Vickers remembered, “So Bob Graham said, ‘I’m gonna eat this paper, and then I’m gonna go appoint her to the Board of Education.’”²⁷ The response from Miss Edna expressed her commitment to moving women forward. Vickers recalled, “‘Miss Edna, oh, she loved it! She stood up and clapped and, of course, when people saw her get up . . . as I’ve said I know that she was at least five inches taller than I.’”²⁸

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Johnson interview.

²⁷ Vickers interview.

²⁸ Ibid.

During the 1980s Miss Edna continued to be active in politics by holding meetings of the Highlands County Democratic Committee in her home and supporting candidates such as Bob Graham for U.S. Senate. She remained active in the Daughters of the American Revolution, alumni associations, and the Hollingsworth Society, by hosting large luncheons and meetings on her estate.²⁹ She stayed busy in both Highlands and Okeechobee Counties while enjoying her home along the Kissimmee River located on the county line. Because she knew so many people, often she would dine out with friends.³⁰ Audrey Vickers recalled, “She just kept going. She’d just get in the car and got somebody to drive her to go to West Palm Beach to go shoppin’ or to Basinger to church”³¹

It was during the 1980s that Miss Edna began to delineate herself from the part she played in equal rights for women and the women’s liberation movement. Even while stating her major disappointment was not getting the equal pay amendment passed, she declared, “I’m for women having their proper rights, of course, but there are women around who are more avid about it than I am. After all, this is a man’s world.”³² She emphasized her abilities to get things done for her district, rather than any association with the “women’s lib movement.” She affirmed, “I tried to do everything I could to get things this area needed. If I’m remembered for that, I’m happy.”³³ Her reticence about promoting herself as a woman’s advocate may have stemmed from the more radical stances that groups such as the National Organization of Women espoused during the years during and after the 1960s. In 1978 the Florida Women’s Alliance organized right

²⁹ “First State Female Rep. Still Active in Politics,” *Sebring News-Sun*, 27 April 1986.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Vickers interview.

³² Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit.”

³³ *Ibid.*

after the ERA amendment failed to pass. Audrey Vickers recounted the statement Edna made at the time that spoke to her position as well as to her sense of humor. “And Miss Edna said, ‘I certainly don’t want anybody goin’ up there and burnin’ their bra on the capitol steps.’ And the group just hooted and hollered.”³⁴ Vickers explained, “She didn’t agree with ERA and she didn’t like militant, aggressive women. But she thought that if I had a job with the newspaper I oughtta’ keep it.” Vickers spent quite a bit of time with Miss Edna during these years and remembered getting “a lecture every once in a while . . . in the car. She had some good advice.”³⁵ Miss Edna advised younger women to strive for equality in the work place, but to always do it in a feminine way.

As Miss Edna aged, she began to slow down; however, her finances stayed strong to the end. Evelyn stated, “She said she didn’t believe in banks because her money was out there on the range.” Dan explained, “When she needed money she borrowed it from the Walacula State Bank. And at the end of each year, she was always trying to balance her budget so that, you know, she’d reinvest the money into her ranch so, what she had and typically what farmers and ranchers did, so that they weren’t taxed too heavily.” He added, “Any time she needed money, she’d sell cows.”³⁶

Junior Miller continued to work for Miss Edna as she aged and began to slow down. The local newspaper quoted Miss Edna, “I love my ranching. I go out on the ranch a lot, although not as much as before. I know every inch of this ranch with my eyes

³⁴ Vickers interview.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Johnson interview.

closed.”³⁷ She continued to want to be involved in the work of the ranch even when she began to get in the way. Junior recalled one day when that was the case:

We was out workin’ cattle one time and we had all the cows the way we wanted ‘em. We got ‘em all in that trench in that trench to go down in. We seen the cattle and it look like they was coming backwards. I seen the Jeep up there. I said what in the world is she doin’ up there with the Jeep? And sure enough, they was comin’ back on us. It seemed to me that if she had just stayed out of the way and let us drive the cattle on through³⁸

Junior understood that Miss Edna wanted to stay involved with the work on the ranch even when her age betrayed her. The following story about their plan to fix a fence where a cow had broken through and strayed onto the highway provides insight into their relationship:

So I took all my tools, I took my hoe diggers, wire, and everything. Well, she went with me. Said, “Well, I’ll go with you and we’ll fix the fence.” Went on down there and the cow was back up under a tree. Somebody done run him off the road. She went down there, and she seen it, and she says, “Well, I don’t think that we can do this by ourselves.” Now I say, “Yeah, we’re gonna have to do it. See them cattle over there?” I said, “They’ll be on this road by the time we leave. See them lookin’ over there at us?” She said, “Well And then it started raining. We got in the truck. And she went to sleep. And that was good enough for me, right there. So I got out. I knew what I was gonna do. I just took all them wires, the loops and cut the wires and piled the wires up, put posts in the ground and when she got up, I had it all wired and had the fence fixed. When she woke up and she got up and lookin’ around say, “What happened? You done fixed the fence?” I sure have and she didn’t know what to say about it. [Junior laughs] She said, “Well, we’ll go to Okeechobee and we’ll have some dinner! And I said, Well, that sounds good to me.” And so we’d go. But she would try to fix that fence to try and help me. And I’d just tell her, “You just hold this wire right here,” just to make her think she was helpin’ me, but she was just in the way. Yeah, she was up in years pretty well. She couldn’t do nothin’ too much, but she wanted to try anyway.³⁹

³⁷ Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit.”

³⁸ Miller interview.

³⁹ Ibid.

Both Junior and Miss Edna attempted to help the other in one way or another. Junior was sensitive to her need to help and stay vital, and Miss Edna wanted to help Junior with the work so he would not have to do it alone.

As Miss Edna aged, one of her favorite past times was taking a group of friends or cowboys out to dinner and taking up two or three tables. Audrey Vickers recalled, “She loved to eat. She was the best advertisement beef ever had. Other than when she ate those raw oysters!”⁴⁰ Junior remembered that even when Miss Edna aged and could not eat as much, she would still order a big meal and take the leftovers home to Blackie, her pet dog. “She’d say, ‘Hey, it’s time to eat! But she wouldn’t eat that much, pick on it a little bit, and then she might have her beer or somethin’ and that’s about it.”⁴¹

Eventually Miss Edna could no longer drive, and she had a woman stay with her, Mrs. Vaughn. Evelyn stated, “She got real, kinda careless about the way she looked.” Dan explained, “She was very lonely. And her mind was slipping.” However, she still retained her sense of humor. One of her favorite rhymes went like this: ‘Here’s to life, ain’t it grand? Just got a divorce from my old man. I laughed and laughed at the judge’s decision. Gave him all the youngun’s and not a single one his-un!’ ” In her later years her nephew, Dan, would begin to say grace with the line, “Here’s to life . . .” and Miss Edna thought that was funny as he continued with the normal blessing.⁴²

As time went on Miss Edna’s health deteriorated and she broke her hip.⁴³ Junior Miller and Audrey Vickers both described her as a strong, tough woman. Miller

⁴⁰ Vickers interview.

⁴¹ Miller interview.

⁴² Johnson interview.

⁴³ Audrey Vickers, “Edna Lockett, ‘First Lady’ of the Highlands, Dies at Age 82,” *Sebring News-Sun*, 1991.

remembered, “When she had her hip broke here—you didn’t never hear her grumble about nothin’, it was no pain or nothin’ like that! She just kept going.”⁴⁴ Evelyn remembered, “We tried to keep nurses with her at home around the clock and they stole her blind.” She continued, “But finally it just got to the point that, you know, we couldn’t keep her out there [the estate] any more. And so she was in a nursing home.” She went into The Palms, a nursing home, in early 1990⁴⁵ Highlands County voters elected Audrey Vickers as a county commissioner in 1990, and she recounted a party at her house before her election:

She [Edna] was not able to go get to the Cattlemen’s Association after she broke her hip. She didn’t go a lot. But anyway we did it in my living room and the county commissioner at the time, Mr. Howerton, came over. She was sitting on the piano bench and all the cattlemen from the board, the state board, were there to make this presentation, and afterwards we were sitting and just talking. And Mr. Howerton went over and sat next to her and she said, “Don’t sit next to me!” She still had that fire. And he said, “Oooh, what’s wrong? Isn’t there room?” She said, “No, you don’t answer my phone calls. You’re my county commissioner, and I’m a woman livin’ alone down there on that river, and I’m scared all the time, and I need to know if I’ve got a sheriff’s deputy comin’ down there or not!”

Well, the poor fellow, he left that day and never did anything about it after that. So, about three weeks later, I usta go by on Sunday afternoon when she was at The Palms. Still, still herself. I’d take her, they’d have a devotional at four o’clock on Sunday afternoon, and so I went in to get her and I said, “Miss Edna . . . ?” She said, “I can’t find my teeth.” I said, “Do you remember me?” She said, “Hell, yes, I remember you. You beat Claude Howerton and sent the sheriff’s deputy down to my place.”⁴⁶

Her mind was sharp at some times, but slipping at others. For example, later that same day Miss Edna accused the Lykes Brothers of taking her teeth. She declared, “They’re

⁴⁴ Miller interview.

⁴⁵ Vickers, “Dies at Age 82.”

⁴⁶ Vickers interview.

buying all my land, and I let ‘em have my teeth.”⁴⁷ It was shortly after this incident that Miss Edna suffered a stroke and stopped talking.

Then in 1991 “she just died in her sleep one morning”⁴⁸ at the Highlands Regional Medical Center at the age of eighty-two.⁴⁹ Audrey Vickers, Highlands County Commissioner, former reporter, and friend of Miss Edna’s wrote the 1991 headline: “Edna Lockett, First Lady of the Highlands, Dies at Age 82.” After announcing funeral services at the First United Methodist Church in Sebring, Vickers recounted the family history in Highlands County, an outline of Edna Pearce Lockett’s biography, and called her a “necessary call” for most Democratic candidates for office even in her later years.⁵⁰ The article concluded, “Her ranch has a ‘historic places’ wrought iron sign at the entrance from U.S. 98 noting its part in Highlands County and Florida History—a place she has insured for herself as well.”⁵¹ The family buried her beside her husband in a cemetery in Sebring with the words “The Lady of the House is Home” etched on her tombstone.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Johnson interview.

⁴⁹ Vickers, “Dies at Age 82.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

EPILOGUE

Today the area around Fort Basinger has not changed much since the middle to the later part of the twentieth century. The population of Highlands County has remained under a hundred thousand¹ even with some people moving in from the coasts to own a country getaway. When discussing the culture of the area, Audrey Vickers explained, “The people are usually fourth and fifth generation. They have been able to work here on their family business or their family ranch or their grove.” She continued, “That doesn’t mean that they don’t go off and get college degrees, but they come back. Which is exciting!”² When asked what might bring them back, Vickers responded, “I think the ambiance of a place like this in today. The natural beauty and people say, ‘Yes, ma’am; no ma’am; How are you today? Tip your hat; I’m glad you’re here.’”³ Loisa Kerwin, director of Florida Atlantic University’s Riverwoods Field Lab, explained it this way: “People are different in the Heartland. They have much more respect; they have higher family values; they are just a cut above what the coastal areas have brought in for the new residents. It’s really obvious.”⁴ Charles “Dan” Johnson has lived in the area since he was born, but did live in Palm Beach County for a few years. He enumerated the differences by stating, “In the smaller communities people are more . . . friendlier, more trusting,

¹ The population as of 2000 for Highlands County was 86,366.

² Audrey Vickers, interview by author, video tape, 11 July 2006, Fort Basinger, FL.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

sometimes more naïve, more naïve to the big city life, I mean.”⁵ Analyzing the reason for the differences, he stated, “I just think there’s things that in the hustle, bustle to survive [urban life] that, you have to have some knowledge, but the people here, you know your neighbor more than in the city.”⁶ The city of Sebring and the surrounding areas have grown recently by Highlands County standards, but the area between Sebring and Okeechobee has remained largely the same as in the 1950s.

Today the Pearce Homestead still sits in a very rural location on the Kissimmee River. Junior Miller is now considered the caretaker instead of the foreman since Edna’s heirs sold the cattle upon her death. Florida Atlantic University’s Loisa Kerwin occasionally organizes community events at the Pearce Homestead so as to keep the property in the minds of the community. The question of what to do with the home is a community quandary. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and Florida Atlantic University share ownership of the estate and neither entity is quite sure what to do with it.⁷ According to newspaper accounts, Pearce Lockett’s heirs donated the home and 423 acres to the SFWMD in exchange for their purchase of 615 acres of the P-4 Ranch for \$1.1 million. Much of the 423 acres surrounding the home is needed for the SFWMD Kissimmee River Restoration project.⁸

The Highlands County Historic Preservation Commission appears interested in turning the property into an interpretive center with a combination park and agricultural

⁵ Evelyn and Charles “Dan” Johnson, interview by author, CD, 20 June 2007, Sebring, FL.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gary Pinnell, “An Estate No One Wants: Water District Has Tried To Give Away The Edna Pearce Lockett Estate. It’s Future Is Historic, But Uncertain,” *Highlands Today*, 12 August 2006.

⁸ Dave Nicholson, “Lockett Home Holds History, Along With Some Headaches: Cost of Restoration, Preservation Pose Some Problems,” *Heartland Today*, undated newspaper clipping from Edna Pearce papers, Sebring Historical Society.

museum perhaps with the assistance of the state park system. The problem is money. When the county controlled the property, the public would appear for Heritage Day Festivals when there were crafts, displays, food, and entertainment, but the rest of the year very few people showed interest in visiting. The rural location makes the property ideal for an agricultural museum and would draw urban dwellers' attention, but the out-of-the-way location is a hindrance for most people who would not drive more than an hour for one small museum and agricultural experience.⁹ As a result of financial fears, the county has yet to take the property; however, meetings between the SFWMD, the Historic Preservation Commission, family members, and other interested parties still occur to discuss the future of the property.

⁹ Pinnell.

CONCLUSION

This project makes a contribution to the historiography of Florida through the biography of a Floridian who made a difference to her state and to her community. Edna Pearce Lockett's service in Tallahassee provided the impetus for women to serve on juries, for the state to complete a major road between two important central Florida towns, for phone and electrical workers to install service much more easily, for the state to label Florida beef properly, and for the creation of state-wide clinics for the treatment of alcoholics. Pearce Lockett's service in Tallahassee lasted only six years, but her service to her community lasted a lifetime. She came from a family who exemplified public service during its century in the Kissimmee Valley, and whenever possible she seized the opportunity to do the same. Highlands County reveres "Miss Edna" not only because of her service to them, but also because she was one of them, as was her family.

This thesis suggests that by studying the lives of individual women like Edna Pearce Lockett historians can learn what made them able to stand out from other women of their time, while also serving as a reflection of the culture of her time. Lockett overcame her gender because of her family history in the state, the support of a strong male figure during her formative years, her independence, and her willingness to use her gender to attain press attention. Women in politics in the early twentieth century did not

expect to be treated like men; they understood that they were expected to retain all the aspects of femininity while serving as lady politicians.

Edna Pearce Lockett overcame the societal expectations of her gender because she and her family were an integral part of that society. The interconnectedness of her family and the community through marriages, business ties, and political associations, cannot be overstated. Her devotion to her father and the effect he had on her ability to believe in herself was experienced by other female candidates of the era with strong father figures. They worked within the confines of their respective eras to make a difference for those who came later. As an educated female Pearce Lockett kept abreast of the important social and political concerns of her time period, and her commitment to contemporary women's issues appeared strong. Without a husband and children to serve, she could devote her attention to Tallahassee, and not agitate those who did not believe women could do both. Edna actually used the novelty of her position (as did other female candidates from earlier eras) as the only "Lady of the House" to make a name for herself, receive press attention, and accomplish her goals of improving Highlands County and assisting the women of Florida in their quest for equality. However, as her era waned she could not understand the actions of the women of the 1960s and their demands in the political arena. "Miss Edna" always maintained the image of the quintessential "Lady" and that's how she believed women should behave in order to get things accomplished. As the matriarch of the family she operated the ranch, protected the estate, elevated the Pearce name, and successfully provided for her heirs upon her death. At the end of her life she wanted to be remembered as someone who served her local community. "I tried

to do everything I could to get things this area needed,” she stated ten years before she died at the age of seventy-two. “If I am remembered for that, I’m happy.”¹

She should be very happy.

¹ Dave Nicholson, “Pioneer Spirit Is Part of Her Legacy,” Tampa Tribune, 12 January 1981.

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