

[Mr. John C. English]

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Interview with Mr. John C. English

a pioneer resident of Lee County.

Jan. 20, 1939.

Interviewed by

MR. JOHN C. ENGLISH, AS PIONEER

RESIDENT OF LEE COUNTY

Mr. English: I came to Lee County in January 1876... came from Georgia, near Bainbridge, six miles. Left home in December 1875, eight of us, my mother and seven children. I was the middle one; had three brothers and three sisters. Came in a covered wagon drawn by steers. Came to take up a homestead near the Caloosahatchee... It was ten years after the war, and everything was in a mess... no one can't imagine it... my mother was a widow. We boys were farming in Georgia. Corn was the money crop...Lots of people went west. We had some relations in Texas who wanted us to come there....we never had planned on coming to Florida... things went along and we didn't have any success getting ahead. There was an old man near us and he had heard about the Caloosahatchee. He came down here and saw the country and he wanted us to come down with him. At first we didn't tumble to his racket, but our crops didn't yield...as time went on we thought more about Florida. Dr. Andrews, a dentists, had a son-in-law, Dr. Anderson, a medical doctor, who lived in Leon County, not far from Tallahassee. Dr. Andrews and Dr. Anderson went to Cedar Keys by railroad and chartered a sailboat and came to the Caloosahatchee

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River above Olga, this side of Olga, in 1874. The country was new...it had just been surveyed...the government was offering home-steads here. It had possibilities...some Americans have always had a craze to pioneer...as long as there was a frontier to go to they was 2 always wanting to go to new places. This old doctor came down and looked around a little and he went back on the boat that come from Cedar Keys and he began to lay his plans to come back in the fall. When the time come, we was ready and come along with him.

My father died Jan. 1, 1870, and left mother with seven children. I was 14, [Samson?] was 198...We landed here with our bare hands. I want to tell you a story I didn't know till lately...Samson told it to me. One day he was was walking with father, and father said to him, "Boy, I don't think I am going to live much longer...when I'm gone I want you to keep the family all together." We always got along and we always stayed together. There never was any very inviting circumstances to make us scatter and make us go each one by himself. The old doctor...we lived about 10 miles from him...we got ready on the first day of December...it was a Monday and /we went down to his place and we stayed there till Saturday; he wasn't ready to go. There was two families of the Andrew...there was 18 in the party that come along. We had three covered wagons in the camp all drawn by steers and one open wagon used to haul supplies. My sister was the youngest; she was about 12 years old, Uncle Sandy was the oldest; he was about 75. The old doctor was 72. We made about 20 miles in a full day. We just travelled along. we would get up early in the morning and get breakfast....The girls did the cooking. We started with what we could, and all along the road we could buy things pretty cheap. Share cropping was the order of the day...we bought things from the niggers.

We had two buggies, and mother and old Mrs. Andrews drove in one buggy and the other buggy was used to go and get supplies. The 3 buggies were drawn by horse. We had three horses. We drove 23 head of cattle. They belonged to the old doctor...his son came with the caravan...him and his wife and his daughter came in a railroad car which he chartered...in that way we shipped our household goods...the railroad car came to Cedar

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Keys. They they chartered a boat and come down to Dr. Andrew camp, this side of Olga, right on the river. (At this point Mr. English was interrupted by Mrs. English, his wife.)

Mrs. English: My mother's folks moved from Georgia to [Thomasville?], but that was when my mother was a little girl, when she was six years old. They came to Tampa on the Alfia (?) River, then later moved to Polk County. My mother moved to Ft. Myers when I was six years old...in '72. We came in an ox wagon from Polk County. It was cattle that brought my father down here, and Capt. Hendry...that was my mother's brother Francis Asbury Hendry, named for the old Methodist bishop. Bury was my mother's oldest brother. My grandfather moved his cattle down here from Georgia. Every man that stayed in the cattle business has been well off...the ones that sold their cattle haven't always prospered. My father was born and raised in Florida...born near Lake City.

Mr. English: It took us six weeks to come down here. We never traveled an Sunday and we stopped once for a couple of days in Sumter County. We had fine weather: no rain, no breakdowns no sickness. When we got down here and struck camp...we camped in the woods this side of Olga and the folks they took the horses and took one of the wagons and fixed it for the horses and went back to Gainesville and filed the homestead claim. We camped till they got back. Took near three weeks.

The traveling wasn't bad from Georgia down here. We come by way of 4 the "wire road." We struck it at the little bridge at the Santa Fe River...the road went all the way down to Punta Rassa...the road followed the telegraph line. The road was a pretty good dirt road...wide enough for a wagon (two oxen) or a cart (one ox).

May 22 was the first big rain we saw after we came here. After we settled here on the river we saw Indians...they used to come to our camp. We first lived about two miles above Ft. Denaud. There was a little branch come in and the Indians would live back in the country but they would come in there and take their boat and go down to Ft. Myers. Sometimes they would stop at our place. I remember one day...it was the first breaking of ground we

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did. We had a yoke of oxen..we cleared about an acre...we was out there plowing...the canoe come along and stopped and the old fellow he come out and looked at what we was doing, and the old fellow he said "You good, me see [um?]," and he took hold of the plow and plowed a piece. The Indians were all friendly Indians. The white folks was always suspicious of them, but we wasn't. Old Tiger Tail came to our camp like he hadn't been there but a couple of weeks. He found his way into our place...it was just about sundown. He put down his pack and spent the night with us and the next morning we put him across the river. The Indians used to buy sweet potatoes and syrup from us.

People just bare-handed like we were on the way down here, we stopped and talked with people. At Dade city we camped and one Sunday an old man come and offered us all the inducement we could to stop there...Some one asked me what sort of business we expected to follow. I told him we was just wanting a place to live and something to do to enable 5 us to live... Samson was the one who got the homestead. We didn't have any cattle...We put in little crops...near Ft. Denaud...near the big prairie. The cattle men were living near Ft. Thompson, and we got in touch with the cattle men and they penned in a big drove of cows and so we had milk and butter. They left us about 25 cows and calves...we cleared the ground and built the pens...in that way we fertilized the land...that was the only way we had of getting fertilizer. The first crop was watermelons, sweet potatoes, sugar cane and peanuts. Our crops grow mighty good, but we quit up there on account of the overflow. We stayed there two years. Samson sold the place after-wards and we bought a fellow's claim here...mother lived to be 86 years old, Dr. Kellum lived right about the camp when we first camped down there....About a week after we came my sister was taken with a bad cold. Dr. Kellum homesteaded down there and he come and treated her. He didn't make a charge for his services, but he had a little chopping for me to do in return for his services...I did it for him. He had a little boat that he didn't have any use for.....while Samson was gone to Gainesville...my brother worked for a Mr. Hickey clearing the ground and I worked for Dr. Kellum...so when Samson got back we took things in the boat and then in the wagon to the homestead. There was a road from where the wire

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road crossed the river to the government road that the government had made from fort to fort...Dr. Kellum was a Catholic...lots of people hates Catholics...Samson and two or three other fellows went to Ft. Myers in a boat and he was taken with a hot fever and Dr. Kellum was in Ft. Myers and Samson went to him. He didn't think the doctor paid him enough attention...the fellows took Samson home....The Next day the doctor rode from his place to our camp because he 6 knew that Samson was sick. He always as long as he lived...if we needed any doctoring, he did it, and he never sent a bill...he never asked for a dollar. If he had a little chopping that we sometimes could do and it seems that very little of that we ever did...We have always been very [fortunate?] in having a doctor....Dr. Jones of Ft. Myers he never sends us a bill...we always had a good doctor that was always just more than a friend.

The homestead was 160 acres near Ft. Denaud. Each boy got 160 acres, John and Jimmie....There was several little patches of citrus trees in Ft. Myers. There was fruit enough so that people had all the fruit they wanted to eat and some to sell. Old man Townsend at Buckingham had a grove...we got our fresh seed to plant from him. He didn't make a living at it...We bought 500 oranges and gave him a dollar and from that we planted our grove. He had some cattle and a farm.

Mrs. English: My father planted a 10 acre grove when I was a child.

Mr. English: The man in Buckingham had two-three acres...We never had an exciting experience...we always had a smooth get-along. I guess the most exciting experience I ever had was the first deer I killed. Ft. Myers was a cow town. There was lots of cattle shipped to Key West and to Cuba...never a boom town...a good steady growth. Wile the cattle business was good the cattle man had a lot of money...Just a neighborhood town...two stores when we first knew it. It was 15 years before the railroad came to Punta Gorda.

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We stayed on that place (the present homestead) in 1881 growing fruit...it was several years before we shipped any fruit to amount to anything...the early fruit was pulled and loaded in bulk in [schooners?]. About \$4 a thousand was the ruling price for oranges.

Mrs. English: We moved to Ft. Myers in 1872 about 10-12 families there. Manual Gonzales was a boat man. They-lived in one of the old fort buildings...the one that was recently used for a library....My uncle Captain Hendry probably lived in one of the old buildings too. Capt. Hendry's dwelling then was just this side of the Royal Palm Hotel. My uncle, Marion Hendry, built a concrete building...Major Frierson came from Tampa. He and my uncle Marion married sisters. Uncle Marion's old house is still standing. The house of Major Frierson is right across the street from the new post office.

The Indians would come into Ft. Myers, 15 or 20 at a time. We always fed them...we wanted to keep on good terms with them. Every-body else fed them too; I don't see how they could eat as much as they did, stopping at every house to eat. No, we weren't afraid of them; it was just the custom to feed the Indians. They would tan their deer skins in the town...it was a regular picnic for us children.

There was an Indian boy, Billy Conapacho, who came in and lived with my uncle Hendry. He went to school with us. He could draw anything. I remember a picture he drew of our old wharf and the boat tied up to it...while he was in school his uncle came and had him to go back with him.....Oh, I remember the name of the boat: it was the Spitfire.

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The great trouble of the Indian is whisky....When we first came to Ft. Myers there was no regular mail service. The minister drove 10 miles to preach.....Capt. Billy Collier and his brother Ben ran a boat service to Ft. Myers from New Orleans and Mobile....The nearest railroad was at Cedar Keys.....I went to /a seminary at Orlando....We went to Tampa from Punta Rassa and took a little boat from Ft. Myers....At Tampa we took the train for Orlando. I attended in the winter of '84-'5.

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Major James Evans came down after the war to homestead and most of the people who came afterwards bought their land from him. This little building (the picture of the little log schoolhouse in one of the Christian Advocates) was owned by Capt. Evans and he let people have it for a school and church. And the first school master was a young man by the name of Bell. That was in '72. We walked a mile to school. Bell was an Englishman. After he left they sent us a preacher who stayed all the time and he taught. Then they built a school building where the Gwynne Institute is now.

(Note: More emphasis on economic conditions must come to present and show dev.