

# The Historical Quarterly

## of the St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Charles R. Croghan, Jr., Editor

Fall 2010

## FLORIDA WILD FLOWERS

A CHIEF delight of the flower-hunter in the Florida peninsula is that on each day of the year something of interest may be found. Nature—the most successful alchemist the world has known—works tirelessly here in winter as in summer, transmuting dull earth and air and water into fragrance and color and beauty,

No other part of our country can show so great a variety in its wild flowers, and in no other state are there so many plants of strange habits and remarkable characteristics. More than three thousand species of flowering plants have already been listed as growing in Florida, and this last number does not include the many cultivated plants, Northern flowers mingle here with the abundant southern flora, and in the country below Miami is a tropical flora, related botanically to the West Indies rather than to the United States.

In variety of size we have the great magnolia, whose perfumed flowers are larger than one's hand, and we have also the tiny wolffia, smallest of known flowering plants, whose entire growth floating in the water is smaller than the head of a common pin.

The great diversity of soils in Florida, often in a limited area, gives rise to a remarkable variety in the flora. From high pineland to marsh, and from sandy shore to swamp, each change in the character of the soil is shown in the different plant associations. In this diversified country are low pinelands where delicate Atamasco lilies spring from the forest floor; dry hills where pink thysanella and velvet-leaved blue lupines grow; hammocks where the great magnolia is at home; swamps where cypress knees take fantastic forms, and where crimson spikes of air plants flame from the tree trunks; streams along whose banks white crinum and wild callas bloom; ocean shores where adventurous flowers open on the sands; lake borders' curtained with grape and smilax, and marshes "paynted all with variable flowers."

The abundance of the individual plants of a species is a marked characteristic of many Florida wild flowers: pink and magenta orchids may be gathered by handfuls; blue iris covers acres upon acres in spring; bladderworts bloom in such profusion that the yellow flowers of one species encircle pineland ponds with broad rings of gold; prairies are whitened by a heliotrope; marshes are golden with milkworts, and with the milkworts grow myriad pipeworts, whose small flowering heads are appropriately called immortelles.

From January onward, during an ordinary season, the variety of flowers continually increases. Even the dry scrub

supports an interesting flora, and where crumbling limestone breaks through the scanty covering of earth near our southern shores plants grow and bloom where it seems impossible such life can exist.

From the Keys and extreme southern Florida, where the mahogany and other trees of the tropics are found, a subtropical flora extends northward along the coasts, while such typically northern species as the red maple, ash, sumac, Virginia creeper, hickory, willow, partridge berry, and others grow far south in the peninsula, and dogwood and sweet-gum show in Florida the autumn coloring that they have in colder states.

Florida marshes in their changing profusion of flowers, and their varied and ever fresh interest, might rival the famed gardens of mythology. In many a marsh from February to May the beautiful yellow and purple flowers of butterworts sway on slender stems above rosettes of insect-catching leaves. While the butterworts are blooming, orange and yellow thimbles of milkworts appear, and a magenta orchid begins to blossom in midwinter. In spring a fragrant pink orchid opens delicately colored flowers; a tall milkwort lifts its clusters of yellow flowers above the lower growth; a sedge spreads conspicuous white bracts, like lilies, above the grasses, and in summer a white orchid sends up its spikes by scores. In the borders of the marsh Osceola's plume displays white racemes of little lilylike flowers, and in autumn a trilisa blooms in royal purple. Beyond the marsh, in open pinelands where green fans of saw palmetto grow in spreading groups beneath the trees, white papaw flowers, escaping in midwinter from brown buds that have imprisoned them, grow larger and still larger; blue lupines match the sky in color; a dwarf clematis changes its nodding flowers of dull violet into feathery gray pinwheels, and in summer a handsome relative of rhododendrons blooms in white.

In contrast to the marshes are the high sandhills and scrub, noted for their rare endemic plants, where a dry selaginella forms miniature gray forests two or three inches high on the sandy stretches between low shrubs, and where a pale Indian pipe rises out of the deep sand.

Ornamental and useful trees and shrubs that have long been prized in famous gardens of other countries abound in Florida. Our palms, magnolias, bay trees, wild olive, hollies, myrtles, and many others are admirable for ornamental planting. Yet the abundance of cultivated exotics sometimes diverts attention from the native flora, William Bartram, who spent many years in botanical explorations during the latter part of the eighteenth

FLORIDA WILD FLOWERS *continued* ...

century, wrote in ecstatic praise of the beauty of Florida's flowers, and André Michaux, who visited Florida late in the same century, stopping at the "ruins of New Smyrna," and camping by the St. Johns River, as his Journal records, also traveled many difficult miles to find flowers that the tourist today passes by on well-made roads. But these men had an advantage the modern traveler sometimes lacks—for they saw the flowers.

A point of especial interest in the Florida flora is the abundance of those plants that have the extraordinary habit of catching and devouring small insects; thereby reversing the usual order, since insects only too commonly devour plants. More than twenty species of insect-catching plants are found in Florida. Our butterworts, sundews, bladderworts, and pitcher-plants are all of them insectivorous, and each of these four groups of plants has its own peculiar way of securing its victims. Brigands and highwaymen of the plant world they are, setting their leaves as traps and spreading them as snares for the unwary, while blossoming alluringly in purple and gold.

But botanizing in Florida is not limited to the ground. Air plants and orchids make the swamps and hammocks of southern Florida hanging gardens of beauty. Fastening their strange growth on the trees, and making use of a special diet of atmospheric dust and air and rain, they produce as brilliantly decked spikes of bloom as any of our earth-growing plants. Even on the straight shafts of cabbage palms they grow, one after another on the trunks, as if climbing to the ferns that make their home in the bases of the leaves above, and many a great live oak bears on its spreading branches luxuriant gardens of ferns, air plants, and orchids.

The ferns of Florida are also of remarkable interest. Several grow as epiphytes; one of these, the grass fern, resembles a grass in its narrow leaves, which hang like tufts of grass from the tree trunks; another, the resurrection fern, has the strange habit of appearing to wither and die during dry weather, but revives in fresh greenness with each rain. The golden polypody frequently grows directly below the crowns of cabbage palms, and winds its brightly colored rootstocks among the bases of the leafstalks. The broad leaves of the leather fern, growing in wet soil toward the coast, are often ten feet tall, and a bracken grows high above one's head. Widely noted are the Florida fern grottoes, where on limestone ledges lacy spleenworts and other tropical ferns of rare beauty grow in regions far from their usual home. Resembling both the ferns and the palms in its leaves is the singular zamia, or coontie, reminiscent of the strange flora of prehistoric ages.

Spring comes to the peninsula before autumn ends. Early spring flowers and belated summer flowers are found together in December, and the cinnamon fern that in northern states sends up its fruiting leaves in spring unrolls them here in autumn. Orchids are gathered in Florida while snow lies deep on northern fields, the yellow jessamine gives its fragrance to midwinter air, and in the warmer parts of the peninsula the magnificent moon flower opens, ghostly white, on winter nights.

From Baker, Mary F.  
*Florida Wildflowers*. 1938. pp.1-5.

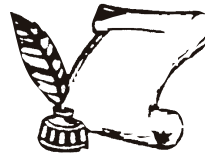
## FAVORITE PUBLISHES MEMOIRS

Xlibris has announced it will publish Jack Favorite's memoirs, with emphasis on his years with the local fire department. Random Thoughts of a Rambling Mind is a "treasure of beautiful stories, from ministering in the local department to the most important and most enduring love story in Favorite's life, to his unwavering faith in God and warm-hearted affection for family."

(Xlibris . Press release)

Jack, now retired after twenty-eight years with the local fire department, lives with his wife Sue in St. Lucie County and is an active member of the St. Lucie Historical Society.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT ...



Your St. Lucie Historical Society has assumed responsibility for the operations of the St. Lucie Regional Historical Center and Museum. The task, which has thrust the society into the limelight, was not accomplished

without considerable work on the part of your president and board members.

Public reception of the change, which was brought about by the county's decision to shut down the museum indefinitely, has been positive. Now we need to translate those good feelings into memberships and financial support.


The society has received a generous donation from the new Digital Domain in Port St. Lucie, who sponsored the September general meeting. We thank you with great appreciation.

Please take advantage of our new position in the public eye and ask your friends and neighbors to consider taking a membership in the society and perhaps giving one to a friend for a holiday gift.

Board Member Johnny Stamm suggested a theme for the society now that we are running the museum. It is: "Preserving our past for the future."

We can all look forward to a busy and rewarding time.

Respectfully,

  
Nancy Bennett, president

## HISTORY IS CALLING YOU!

Your help is needed in making history come alive for visitors to the St. Lucie Historical Center and Museum. You are needed as volunteers in our *all-volunteer operation.*

The tasks are varied and many. A number of volunteers have been cleaning, dusting, and polishing everything in the buildings. That is a task which must continue and some of you might be asked to do that.

Others will be needed as docents to guide people around and explain the exhibits and their significance. By the way, if you speak a foreign language such as Spanish, French, German, Italian or even Japanese or Chinese, you are especially desirable.

The museum will be open at least 20 hours a week, and we hope there will be lots of people in need of your assistance.

The only fly in the ointment is that because of new laws involving anyone who will be in contact with children – and there were 14,000 of them who went through the museum last year, you will have to submit to a background check. As much as we wish we could pay for it for you, there will be a cost of \$20 just to help with our programs. It certainly is a small price to keep the museum doors open.

If you would like to help, please contact any officer or director and they will gladly enlist your valuable services.

Call 462-1795 for more details.

*Give a Gift of History to the  
St. Lucie History Center and Museum*



*Mail donations to:*

*Friends of the St. Lucie Historical Center and Museum*

*P.O. Box 578 Fort Pierce, FL 34954*

*Operated for the people of Treasure Coast by the St. Lucie Historical Society*

*501c.3 Not For Profit Corporation*

*The St. Lucie Historical Society*

**CORDIALLY INVITES YOU**

**TO CELEBRATE THE RE-OPENING OF THE**

*St. Lucie County*

*Regional History Center/Museum*

**414 SEAWAY DRIVE**

**FORT PIERCE, FLORIDA**

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**1 P.M. - 4 P.M.**

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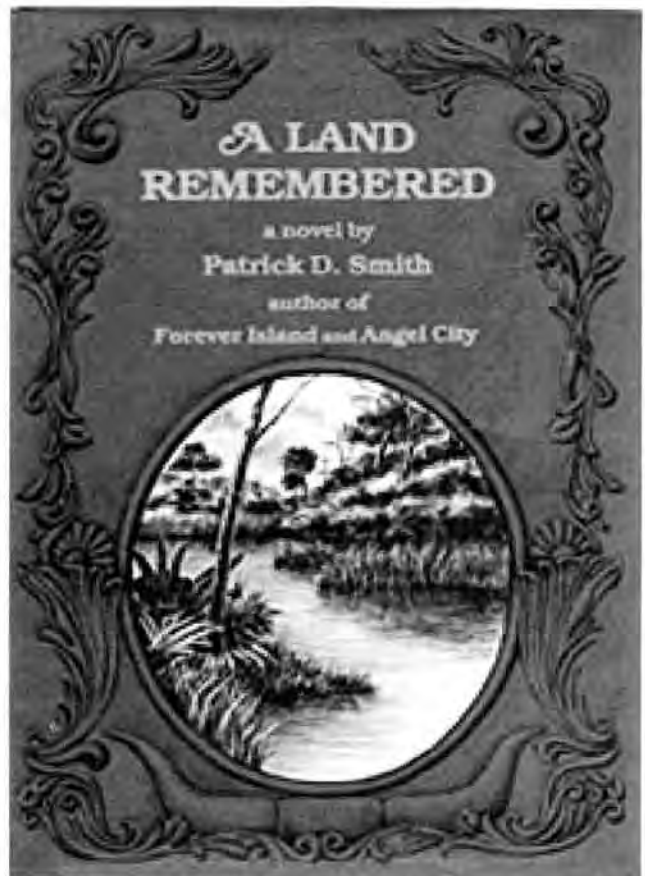
**Treasure Ticket**

**\$10 each**

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*The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.,  
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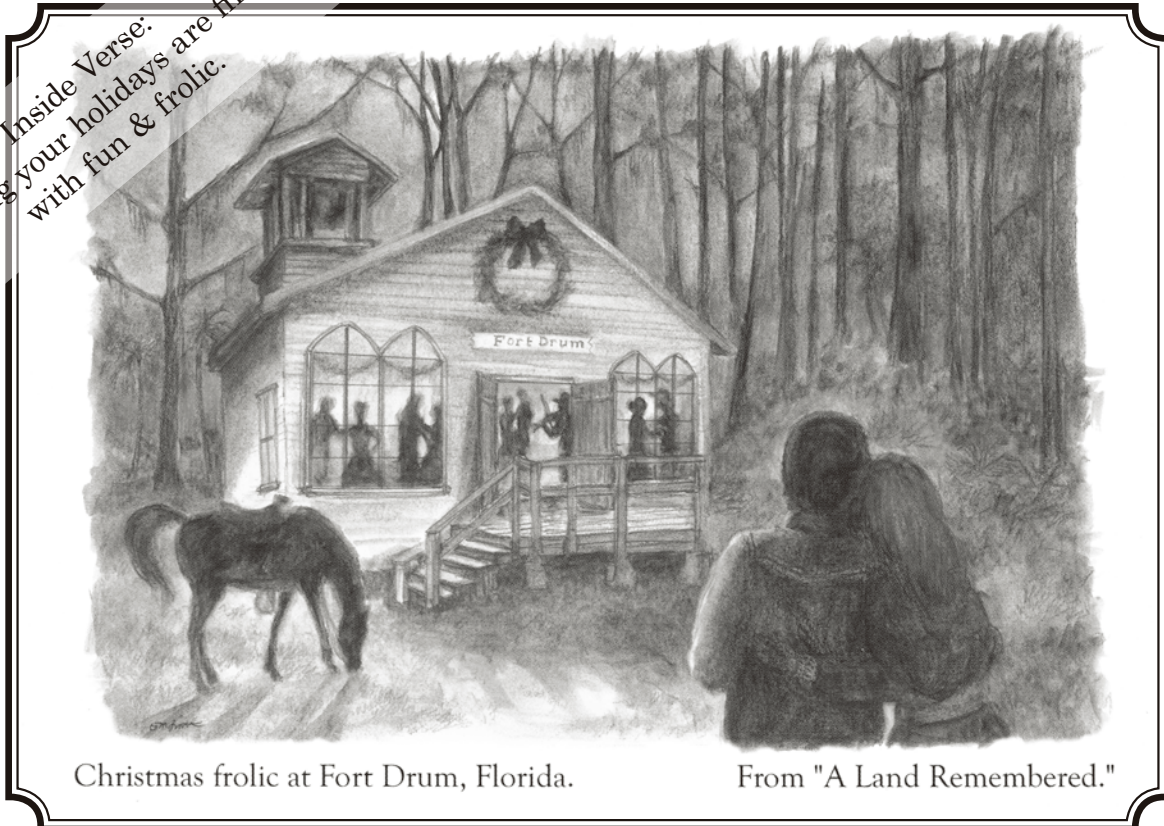
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**Drawing: December 16, 2010**  
The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc. A 501.3c not for profit corporation

## **“A Land Remembered” Holiday Cards**

Inside Verse:  
Hoping your holidays are filled  
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### **“Promised”**

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*Card concept sketched by Patrick Smith  
The Fort Drum Christmas frolic of 1875 from*

*A Land Remembered*

**ON SALE NOW!!**



The *poinsettia* was named for Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, U. S. ambassador to the newly independent Republic of Mexico from 1825 to 1829. He was also a keen botanist and gardener, and he introduced the American elm to Mexico as well as sending the poin-

settia to America. The poinsettia, whose color comes not from its flowers (which are an insignificant yellow), but from its brilliant bracts, was used in Mexico to decorate churches at Christmas time and called *flor de la noche buena*, or “Nativity flower.”

The plant was not the only thing called after Poinsett. His policies in Mexico were unpopular, and the Mexicans coined the word “*poinsettismo*” to describe intrusive and officious behavior. He was an active politician at home and a member of the House of Representatives and of the Unionist party in South Carolina, which supported the Doctrine of Nullification—the rights of individual states to set aside federal laws that violated their “compact” with the American Constitution. In 1837 he was secretary of war. He was also a founder of the National Institute for Promotion of Science and Useful Arts, which later became the Smithsonian.

Though it comes from mostly tropical Mexico, the poinsettia is a short-day plant and only sets flowers when the nights are long and the days short. In its native country it grows to sixteen feet, but it is widely raised here in greenhouses for Christmas. If you wish to make it bloom again next Christmas, you must practice a little *poinsettismo* against its natural inclinations and cover it like a pet parrot early every evening so it gets no light.

It is a member of the euphorbia, or spurge, family, called after Euphorbus, physician to Juha, king of the ancient kingdom of Mauretania. King Juba was married to Cleopatra Selene, daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. There is a tradition that Dioscorides, who wrote the famous *De Materia Medica*, was Antony and Cleopatra’s physician, so it is not too fanciful to suppose that Euphorbus had an interest in botany. The name “spurge” comes from the Old French *espurge*, and it was one of the powerful purgatives used in the Middle Ages to rid the body of “evil humors” like black bile and melancholy. Taken in quantity, however, the euphorbias are poisonous, and their sap can cause a blistering rash—so the Christ child’s flower should be kept well away from animals and children.

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The *Christmas rose* blooms at Christmastime. It really does and even in Pennsylvania the flowers push out of the snow. The blooms last for weeks, and the plant lasts for years.

It is supposed to have bloomed outside the stable at Bethlehem, although scholars have taken pains to discover that it is not native to the Holy Land. While applauding their industry, some people don’t care anyway, and still think of the stable in the snow, the hovering angels, the kneeling donkey, and the

other details that may not fit climate, gravity, or animal behavior patterns. The Christmas rose fits nicely into the story, for its legend tells us that a little country girl visited the stable and wept because she had nothing to give the Christ child. Her tears fell in the snow and a hovering angel landed and showed her the Christmas rose poking through the snow to use as her gift.

It’s actually not at all the thing to give to a newborn baby as it’s very poisonous, and its botanical name is from the Greek *hellein* (to kill) and *bora* (food). It was used from ancient times (with caution) as a medicine, especially to cure worms in children. Gilbert White mentions it in his letters from Selborne but warns that it is a “violent remedy” that kills the worms but might also kill the patient. John Gerard said it was good for “mad and furious men, and for all those that are troubled with blacke cholera, and molested with melancholy.”

It was used in ancient Greece by Melampus to cure the daughters of Proetus, king of Tiryns. These young women had treated with contempt a statue (some say of Hera, others of Dionysus). As a punishment they were deprived of their senses and streaked naked through the Peloponnesus. Melampus, who was a shepherd, somehow got them to stop long enough to drink milk from his goats, which had eaten hellebore, and they were cured. Melampus asked for, and got, quite a bit of Proetus’s kingdom for curing his daughters.

The Christmas rose is surely a miraculous plant, regardless of its name’s unscientific origins. For one thing, its seeds are spread by, of all things, snails. They eat the oil covering the seed and carry the rest away in their slime. Certainly a different process than that of being born from tears, but slime and tears glitter equally on moonlit nights and both are mysterious. It’s certainly no normal plant, as anyone who has come out on a January morning and looked at it will attest. The flowers are literally frozen solid and yet, when the ice falls away, the petals are soft and fresh as spring blossoms. There is surely a scientific explanation for this, but some just marvel at it anyway.

# MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS:

- Free admission to the St. Lucie County Historical Museum.
- Free subscription to the Society’s publications. A Winter and Summer issue of “The Historical Quarterly” which features in-depth writings on a variety of local historical subjects. An E-Newsletter can be found on our website [www.stluciehistoricalsociety.org](http://www.stluciehistoricalsociety.org)
- Invitations to the September – May dinner program meetings.
- Invitations to St. Lucie County Regional History Center / Museum exhibition preview receptions.

PLEASE JOIN US IN PRESERVING OUR LOCAL HERITAGE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

## St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

### Membership Application

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse’s name: \_\_\_\_\_

Names & Ages of Minor Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: Home: \_\_\_\_\_ Business: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

We wish to join the society at the level indicated (*Membership year is from September to August*):

New     Renewal     Individual (\$15)     Family (\$20)     Business (\$50)

Yes, I’m interested in volunteer activities.

**Please make check payable to:**

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.  
P.O. Box 578, Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

*For information call: 772-461-8020*

Send a gift membership to:

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Membership is open to any interested person

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[www.stluciehistoricalsociety.org](http://www.stluciehistoricalsociety.org)

## 2010 - 2011 Officers & Board of Directors

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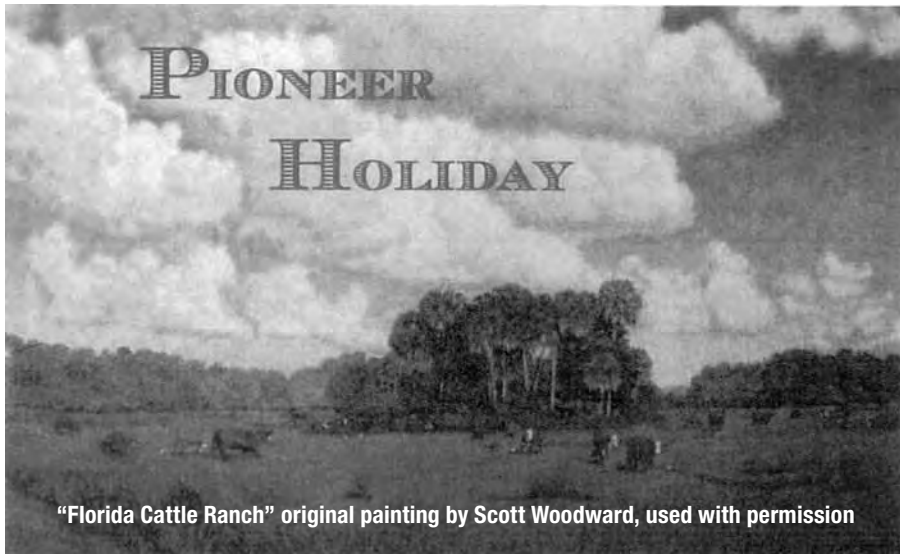
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Quarterly Editor: Charles Croghan



"Florida Cattle Ranch" original painting by Scott Woodward, used with permission

## A Pioneer Holiday Celebration at Heathcote Botanical Gardens

Saturday, December 11, 2010  
10am - 4pm

*To benefit Heathcote and the  
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\$6 adult / \$2 children admission donation  
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