



Background: Hook and Ladder
No. 1 in front of the red brick fire house
behind City Hall, circa 1897. (Courtesy Hunt)

Putting the Fire Out IN OLD KEY WEST

by
Alex Vega



Inset: This sketch was taken from the Cupola of Tift's tower in June of 1838. It shows the first fire engine house which was located at the foot of Duval near Front Street. (Courtesy Florida State Archives)

The wood-framed clapboard houses of Key West in the Nineteenth Century were naturally prone to burn to the ground. Combining their ready flammability with insufficient water supplies, unreliable pumping equipment and fragmented fire brigades yielded a formula for disaster which plagued the city up into the Roaring 1920's. The history of island commu-

In October of 1834, one of the first volunteer fire departments in the state of Florida was organized in Key West. Three months later, in January of 1835, a small fire occurred in the out house of Judge Webb's yard. The Fire Department failed to respond.

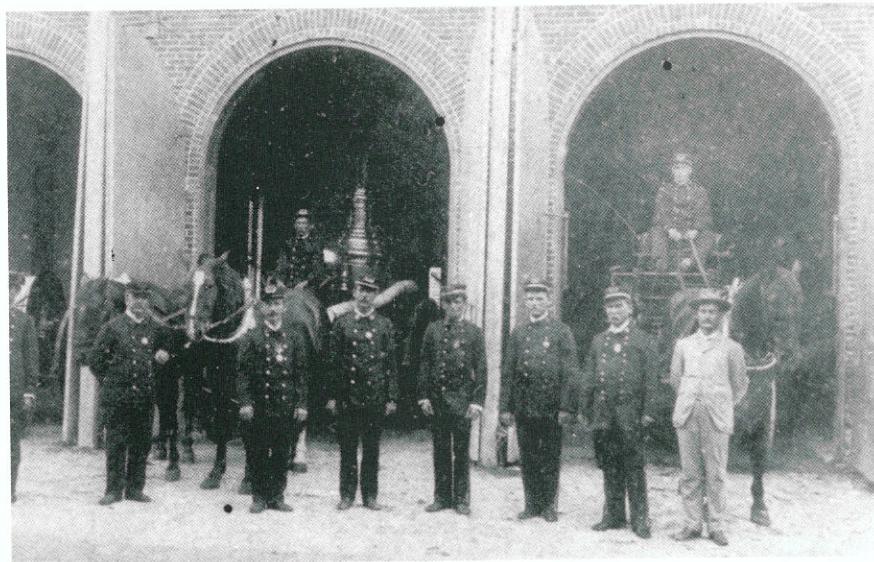
Many of the citizens of the island inquired why the apparatus was not conveyed to Judge Webb's residence. The Fire Department's excuse was that there was no fire alarm in the city to alert them. Had some type of alarm been given, the active members would have conveyed the engine to the fire scene. Willingness and enthusiasm were not enough, and the first test of the new brigade yielded them failing marks.

A better system had to be found, and shortly after the incident the citizens held a meeting to try to reorganize the Fire Department. They offered as bait a new hand engine and hose purchased at public

subscription. Engraved on the front of the apparatus was the motto: "Where duty calls there you will find us." They elected Stephen Mallory as their new director.

The new organization with its new equipment brought with it a season of relative quiet, and no major fires were noted for several years. The engine was seldom used except for parades and special occasions. Then in 1843 a large wooden warehouse owned by Fielding A. Brown caught fire. The alarm system turned out the volunteers, and the hand engine was brought to the scene by the fire company. When the firemen tried to use it, it proved unfit for duty in the practical business of putting out fires. The building was totally destroyed. After the fire the disgusted citizens and firemen carried the engine to the end of the wharf and threw it into the sea.

By 1843 Stephen Mallory moved to Pensacola, where his wife's



Firemen of Station No. 3 posing with their first new motorized American La France pumper and a 1908 American La France horse drawn steamer, circa 1914.

nity's Fire Department is a classic example of the hazards of our growing nation in

those perilous times. With more excuses than results, the tiny fire unit's records offer insights into the evolution of professional fire fighting and a semi-humorous look into our past.

family had lived. That left Joseph A. Thouron in charge of the fire company. After the removal of Thouron to Charleston, South Carolina, in 1848, the company totally disbanded.

In 1859, Key West suffered its first big fire in a warehouse owned by L.M. Shaefer at the corner of Front and Duval Street. The fire burned for eight hours, and in a two-block area every building except two was consumed—71 buildings and 40 outhouses in all. Since no organized body of firemen existed in the city at that time, the military used whatever apparatus it had to fight the fire. The preservation of the remaining portion of the city was attributed to the thoughtful and daring action of Henry Mulrennon. He procured a keg of gun powder from Fort Taylor, and with the fire raging around him, he entered his own house at the corner of Fitzpatrick and Greene Street and put the keg of powder in place. He then laid a train of powder

and blew up his own house, preventing the fire from spreading any further.

Two years later the Civil War broke out, and quickly the Union Army took control of Fort Taylor which faced the Key West harbor. By occupying the fort, they created a blockade which greatly limited Confederate contraband from getting through the Straits of Florida. The military presence assumed all civil responsibilities including the fire protection for the island of Key West.

The colorful figure of Stephen Mallory, Key West's first Fire Chief, figured prominently in the War. Mallory was later elected to the U. S. Senate in 1851, but during the War he served as Secretary of the Navy for the Confederacy under President Jefferson Davis. Mallory and his associate, Asa Tift also from Key West, were instrumental in the development of the Ironclad ships for the Confederate cause. Mallory was captured toward the end of the war in 1865 and sent to a Union prison in Lafayette, New York, where he was kept until 1866.

These are a few accounts written by Union soldier Henry J. Hornbeck of the 47th Pennsylvania Volunteers who was stationed on and off in Key West during the Civil War.

Saturday, March 28, 1863 – *At Key West, about 1 o'clock tonight was roused up by a cry of Fire, a house and barn burnt down in the heart of the city, (Henry Hornbeck) assisted as much as possible in quelling the flames, subsided by 4 o'clock, it is almost a miracle that the whole City did not burn down, having no Engine in this place, and all the water was passed in buckets, had it not been for the Soldiers & Sailors everything would have been destroyed, went to bed again at 4 o'clock.*

December - 1863 – *The workers at the fortifications in Key West demanded back pay and a raise in December, their rate was \$1.40 per day. The town had some excitement in December as a spark from a railway locomotive set the mess hall on fire, burning it to the ground; and nature retaliated with a violent storm which caused heavy damage, putting the railroad out of service.*

This military fire protection continued well after the Civil War, and it wasn't until November of 1875 that Key

West reorganized its fire department. Some of the original charter members were J. C. Whalton, H. G. Fulford, J. W. V. R. Plummer, O. H. Dorsett, and George McDonald. A few months later in February of 1876, they elected O. H. Dorsett as their new Chief. It was mainly a volunteer department consisting of 103 members. The parent hose company was known as the Hook & Ladder. Chief Dorsett quickly started to shape up the new department by drilling and disciplining his men.

Meanwhile the technology of fire fighting started coming of age. The development of more efficient steam-powered pumps and of flexible hose greatly improved fire fighting capabilities. The first steam-powered fire engine was built in London in 1829, and its 10 horsepower pump could throw a stream of water nearly 90 feet. English engineers first brought steam-powered fire engines to America in 1840. Because steam propulsion systems proved to be unreliable, the ten-ton engines were drawn by teams of horses.

At the time of Chief Dorsett, the Key West department still had no apparatus of its own and was allowed to use the government's hand pumper. The city decided to buy a new hand pump and hose reel. The pump, known as "Big Six of New York," did not give satisfactory results compared to the new steam pumps, and the city purchased a Button Steam Fire Engine and Hose Reel.

Shortly afterward, on the American Centennial, July 4, 1876, the first of several parades began at 9:00 a.m. It was the Firemen's Parade, led by the Isle of the Sea Band and the shining new fire engine. The 75 men of the newly reorganized Hook and Ladder Company paraded along proudly in their handsome uniforms. They marched towards City Hall which was to be dedicated that morning. One ceremony was the installation of the fire department in their new accommodations, a wooden structure behind the new City building.

Flags were flying, and the music was playing, when a celebrating cannon discharged a shot into Mr. Alder-slade's roof. The cannon shot continued to smolder in the attic between the shingles and the ceiling. At twelve noon, while the dedication of City Hall was in progress a



This photo of Stephen Mallory was taken in the early 1850s when he became a member of the Senate. (Courtesy National Archives)

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few blocks away, the fire blazed through Mr. Alderslade's roof.

The fire alarm sounded, 75 firemen darted to the fire with their shining new fire engine, and they subdued the flames in less than ten minutes. In this rare and fortunate incident, the right machinery and manpower were in the right place at the right time, and for once man triumphed over the elements.

The fickle new machines and the luck of Key West brought about yet one more spectacular disaster. For the next 10 years the Button steam fire engine was used only for parades, and being maintained by amateurs on an irregular basis, it fell into disrepair. It had to be sent to New York for an overhaul, arriving back in Key West on April 1, 1886. Just two days before the fire engine returned, on March 30, 1886, the biggest fire in Key West history had occurred.

It started in the San Carlos Hall, a favorite meeting place for Cuban revolutionaries. The Fire Department turned out promptly, but had only hand pumbers to work with. The fire quickly spread to surrounding buildings and soon was out of control. It burned for twelve hours destroying two-thirds of the business district, in all, about 50 acres. Losses were estimated to be between one and a half million and two million dollars. The wooden fire house behind city hall, still the only fire house on the island, was destroyed.

Profiting from this severe lesson, the city bought two powerful Button steam engines and the county an additional one. Within

months a one story wooden fire house was built at the same location as the old one. This was followed by another fire house on Fleming Street behind the county jail. In 1887 a third fire house was built on Division Street, now Truman Avenue.

Now the era of fire having the advantage in its skirmishes with Key West was rapidly drawing to a close. In 1888 a system of water works for

fire-fighting purposes was installed using salt water. That same year a privately-owned telegraph fire alarm system spread throughout the city. Its main office was in the Western Union building on Greene Street. With the completion of a new City Hall on Ann and Greene Streets in 1891, a new red brick fire house was built behind City Hall to replace the temporary wooden structure erected after the Great Fire of 1886. This became the home of Hook and Ladder No. 1.

In 1906 a Gamewell Fire alarm system was installed throughout the city at a cost of \$7,000. A fire bell was also purchased from McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland, and was connected to the fire alarm system.

Nature did not give up without another fight, and a devastating hurricane hit Key West on October 11, 1909, destroying Fire House No. 1 and damaging Fire House No. 3. The tower containing the fire bell was destroyed, but the bell was not damaged. Again the city fought back, and within six months a new tower was erected for the fire bell in the city cemetery near Grinnell Street.

In 1910, two new boilers of

100 horsepower each were installed for pumping water into the standpipe through the city water mains. That year the Fire Department relocated downstairs in the meat market that was located at City Hall.

The Fire Department received its first two motorized American La France fire engines in August and September of 1914. The first engine went to Station No. 1 and second to Station No. 3. By 1917 the Key West Fire Department was fully motorized, except for one steamer which was left in reserve at No. 3, thus bringing the era of the horse drawn steamer to an end.

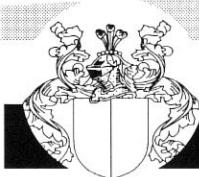


A native of Key West, Captain Alex Vega, fire inspector, Key West Fire Marshall's Office, is a second-generation Key West fire fighter as well as the fire department historian. He is also president of Old Firehouse Preservation, Inc., which is working toward establishing a Key West fire fighters museum at the Grinnell Street fire station. In addition, he is the author of the pamphlet, "Florida's State Firemen's Association," recounting the story of the organization, principally in the 1890s and early 1900s, when Key West was the only South Florida member. The pamphlet is on sale in the Indies Company Museum Store.

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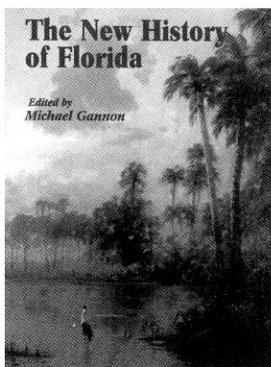
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THE NEW HISTORY OF FLORIDA

By Michael Gannon. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995. 240 pages. \$49.95.

Review by Paul S. George, Ph.D.



Until the recent past, Florida historiography has been plagued by a dearth of histories exploring the full story of its rich, multilayered past. Michael Gannon, a

superb historian, storyteller and professor of history at the University of Florida, addressed this problem with the publication of *Florida, A Short History* in 1993, but promised a work of much greater consequence in conjunction with the observance of the state's sesquicentennial in 1995. With the publication of *The New History of Florida*, Gannon has delivered on this promise in impressive fashion.

Gannon wrote in the introduction of this work that in the "past quarter century there has been a veritable efflorescence of historical research activity directed at uncovering the major details of Florida's long past, in the course of which a galaxy of specialists emerged to match the best com-

pany of state historians to be found in any other part of the country. With such an extraordinary amount of new information at hand, and with such an impressive corps of scholars to write it down, the editor of this book saw an eminently appropriate way to observe Florida's Sesquicentennial: to persuade these scholars to join in composing a new one-volume history of Florida."

To that end, Gannon invited prospective contributors (there are twenty-two in all) to a planning session in Gainesville in 1993. There they established the rules of procedure, with "each essay," whether it observed a portion of the state's story chronologically or thematically, "written especially for this volume, presenting in compact fashion the most recent findings and interpretations in each specialist's field." The result is a masterly examination of Florida's history, offering, as Gannon anticipated, the latest research in Florida history. Moreover, there

is a seamless quality between chapters, allowing the reader to move easily from one topic or era to the next.

Chapters range from one concerned with the state's original inhabitants to another recounting the influx of recent immigrants and the growth of multiculturalism. Especially appealing to this reviewer was Gary Mormino's sparkling

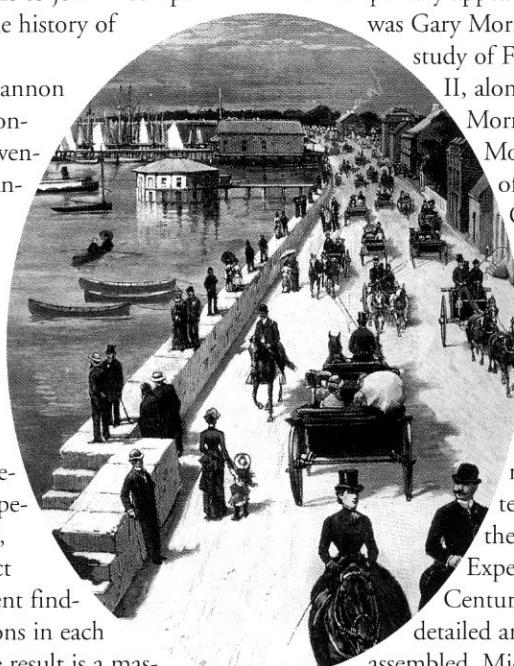
study of Florida in World War II, along with historians

Mormino and Raymond Mohl's "Social History of Modern Florida."

Other essays include

the missions of Spanish Florida, British rule in the Floridas, free and enslaved Africans in Florida from the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, and the "African-American

Experience in Twentieth-Century Florida." Richly detailed and masterfully assembled, Michael Gannon's *The New History of Florida* will stand as the standard history of the Sunshine State for many years to come.



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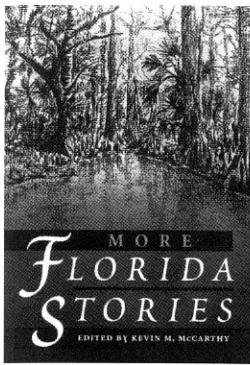
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MORE FLORIDA STORIES

Edited by Kevin M. McCarthy. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. 222 pages. \$29.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Review by Leah La Plante



In Kevin McCarthy's second volume of Florida stories, there is a story by Ernest Lyons, "A Blade of Grass," in which a small town newspaper claims to be the "Voice of the Empire of the Sun." That could well be the theme for McCarthy's extensive and outstanding effort to give voice to the great and growing chorus of writers who in some degree or way take their inspiration from "The Sunshine State."

So far McCarthy, a professor of English and Florida studies at the University of Florida, is the author/editor of sixteen mostly-Florida books, among them *Florida Stories*, *Nine Florida Stories* by Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *Florida Lighthouses*, all from the University Press of Florida, and *The Book Lover's Guide to Florida*, Pineapple Press. As of this moment, there are four more books in the works.

Why "mostly-Florida?" Interestingly enough, McCarthy is something of a world-rover. In the sixties he was in the Peace Corps in Turkey (he speaks Turkish), lectured as a Fulbright scholar in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, and taught in Egypt. McCarthy reports that he finds in the Middle East a stimulating contrast to life at home, and still visits the area. In addition, of his four pending books, one is about Irish lighthouses, and another is on Georgian forts. Nevertheless, McCarthy says that his main writing emphasis will continue to be Florida.

Florida Stories has a rich lineup of well-known sometime-Florida writers - Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Gore Vidal, Philip Wylie and more. In his introduction McCarthy says that his purpose is "to make the public aware of well-written, entertaining literature set in Florida." Some of the authors in both this and the second volume, in particular Marjorie Kinnan

Rawlings and Harry Crews, found in the "Empire of the Sun" the primary stimulus of their art. Crews states, "Until I have a place firmly in my head, until I begin to smell it and taste it, until it lives in the ends of my fingers, a story simply will not come alive for me."

For the second volume, *More Florida Stories*, McCarthy has chosen authors whose names are not as well known, but most of whom have lived in the state a significant part of their lives (almost half were either born in Florida or elsewhere in the south). Is he close to running out of authors? Hardly. In his introduction, McCarthy says, "I once put together a collection of 'Florida writers' and came up with over two thousand names and five thousand works of literature written in and about the state, all published since 1950." According to a recent *Miami Herald* article, the latest tourist industry survey names Florida as the number one winter destination.

One of the authors, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who vacationed in Florida for 18 winters (1867 to 1884), put it this way: "The great charm, after all, of this life, is its outdoorness. . . . To be able to sit with windows open; to hear birds daily; to eat fruit from trees, and pick flowers from hedges all winter long — is about the whole of the story." From the Keys to the populous coasts, from Lake Okeechobee north to the central hills and cattle ranches, from the northern swamps and over across the Panhandle, this sun-blessed state of two time zones would seem, as many an environment

alist would say, to have too much attraction for its own good.

In *More Florida Stories* Kevin McCarthy has reached into this richness and put together a well-balanced and very readerly selection, especially as a companion volume to *Florida Stories*. His main criteria for inclusion is "the quality of the writing, a significant Florida setting, and a story well told." To his task, McCarthy brings two important characteristics: thoroughness and great literary sensitivity. He provides a not over-wordy but very helpful introduction to each of his books; further, for each story there is a blending of background material on the author and a lead-in to the tale, written with great care and insight, adding much to the reader's enjoyment.

"The Fast Duel" of Ned Buntline's title is a humorous hoax. In her story "Panther," Rubylea Hall lets the reader know what to do if chased by a Florida panther: peel off your garments one at a time and throw them behind you; the panther will stop and sniff each one, thus giving you some running time! Readers may not know that *Everglades: River of Grass* author Marjory Stoneman Douglas also wrote many short stories, one of which is included. Ironically, in the last story, Constance Fenimore Woolson's "The South Devil," Mark, one the main characters, is, at the end of the story, bitter about his Florida experience and plans to leave: "... he started up the long, low, white peninsula, set with its olive-woods in a sapphire sea; and his face was turned northward."

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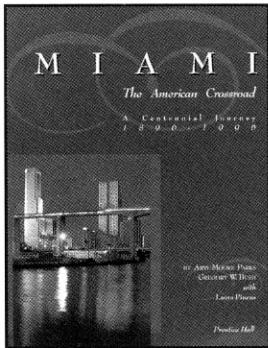
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Book Reviews

MIAMI, THE AMERICAN CROSSROAD: A CENTENNIAL JOURNEY 1896-1996
 by Arva Moore Parks and Gregory Bush, with Laura Pincus.
 Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing. 1996. 220 pages. \$19.95 cloth.

Review by Carlos Plaza



followed by original documents detailing that history in the words of those who made it. A simple but brilliant idea. Designed as a companion local history text in the Dade County Public Schools American history curriculum, it proves the incredible value of primary sources to the student and lay reader alike, making the difference, perhaps, between understanding and simply knowing history. Consider, for example, spending Christmas in 1874 Miami with a band of Seminoles and a former postmaster who during his tenure changed the spelling of Miami to "Maama." Or experiencing the great hurricane of 1926 through the eyes of a Miami journalist who began his description with the words, "I have just come through Hell." Or feeling the frustration and hope of a young African American who speaks of "Mi-ami" and "Their-ami."

Such details deepen our understanding and bridge the shallow puddles of scanty histories as well as the muddy ponds of overburdened biographies. Here, the amateur historian is given the opportunity (or rewarding task) of personally analyzing and interpreting the character and motivation of those who made and shaped our history - an exercise that may just change your mind about a few things and reveal Miami's history to be - as in the author's words - "dazzling in its accomplishment, its variety of humanity, its color and expressions of hope and joy, tragedy, greed and suffering."

Endorsing the authors' approach, Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara W. Tuchman gives this quote from Aesop's Fables when speaking of the need to examine various, perhaps conflicting, primary sources for any one event: "There are many statues of men slaying lions, but if only the lions were sculptors there might be quite a different set of statues." Mrs. Tuchman speaks of more subtle discrepancies among the actors and observers of events than the overstated axiom "History is written by the winners" implies.

The celebrated historical writer also stresses the importance of a *sense of place* to the accurate portrayal of history. "On the terrain motives become clear, reasons and explanations and origins of things emerge that might otherwise have remained obscure. As a source of understanding, not to mention as a corrective for fixed ideas and mistaken notions, nothing is more valuable than knowing the scene in person." The authors' of *Miami, The American Crossroad* oblige. Throughout the book are brief bordered "Living History" sections providing a photo, address and historical relevance of still extant sites.

A final word and warning about this text: reading primary sources has been known to dull the edge of criticism that often accompanies hindsight. Upon honest interpretation you may find your-

self forgiving, if not outright supporting, those turn-of-the century Miamians who saw the draining of the Everglades as tantamount to the creation of the "Promised Land." After page 46 of *Miami, The American Crossroad*, you will, at the very least, be tempted to dig deeper into the history of our municipal forebears.

Creating this spark of interest is perhaps the volume's greatest asset. The selection of complete and abbreviated letters, diaries, interviews, speeches, government documents and magazine and newspaper articles is both balanced and tantalizing. Furthermore, they reveal, as in the case of the now nasty notion of Everglades drainage, that things were (and are) not always what they seem. We must look beneath the veneer of sentiments that reflect the popular attitudes of our times.

True, many of us believe in eternal truths, an absolute right and wrong in the spirit of The Ten Commandments, if you will. Yet the very same moral ideals would lead us to conclude that you can't always judge yesterday's people by today's standards. Following this line of reasoning, government corruption and lynchings would always be subject to condemnation; but what of the Everglades, Immigration or drug testing? Nothing if not food for thought and Parks, Bush and Pincus have provided the appetizers.

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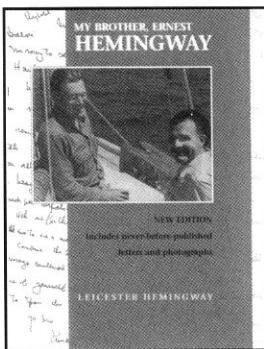
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MY BROTHER, ERNEST HEMINGWAY
by Leicester Hemingway. Sarasota: Pineapple Press Inc., 1996. 327 pages. \$21.95

Review by Stuart McIver



On August 31, 1959 Leicester Hemingway wrote to his older brother Ernest: "For three years I've been working on a biography of you and now

its nearly ready for publication. I've tried it on a few friends. They're immensely impressed with the warmth and friendliness of the point of view, seeing it as a re-creation of family life and a lifetime of adventures, and an important document for followers of your life, who are almost as numerous as taxpayers."

Actually Ernest Hemingway, winner of both the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes and already one of the most important writers on the face of the earth, did not want anybody to write a biography of him while he was still alive. He considered it unlucky.

Still, he encouraged his kid brother, 16 years his junior, to continue the project. Leicester, in turn, did not have the book published until 1962, the year after his brother's suicide.

It remains to this day one of the best accounts of the human side of Ernest Hemingway. The book is at its best in recalling Hemingway's years in Key West and in Cuba, particularly in its coverage of Ernest's Gulf Stream adventures with his beloved fishing boat *Pilar*.

Pineapple Press has done a ser-

vice to followers of Hemingway and South Florida history by putting the book back in print in an expanded new edition which includes new pictures, letters never before published and reminiscences about Leicester himself, written by other writers who knew Ernest and by members of the extended Hemingway clan, a group in which some good writing genes luckily reside, particularly in Hilary, Leicester's daughter, and Lorian, Ernest's granddaughter. The new edition also makes up for an unfortunate lack in previous versions; a good index has been added.

Leicester Hemingway, in his later years a resident of Miami Beach, was well known in South Florida and the Caribbean. He lived in Jamaica and in Bimini where he published and edited a newspaper.

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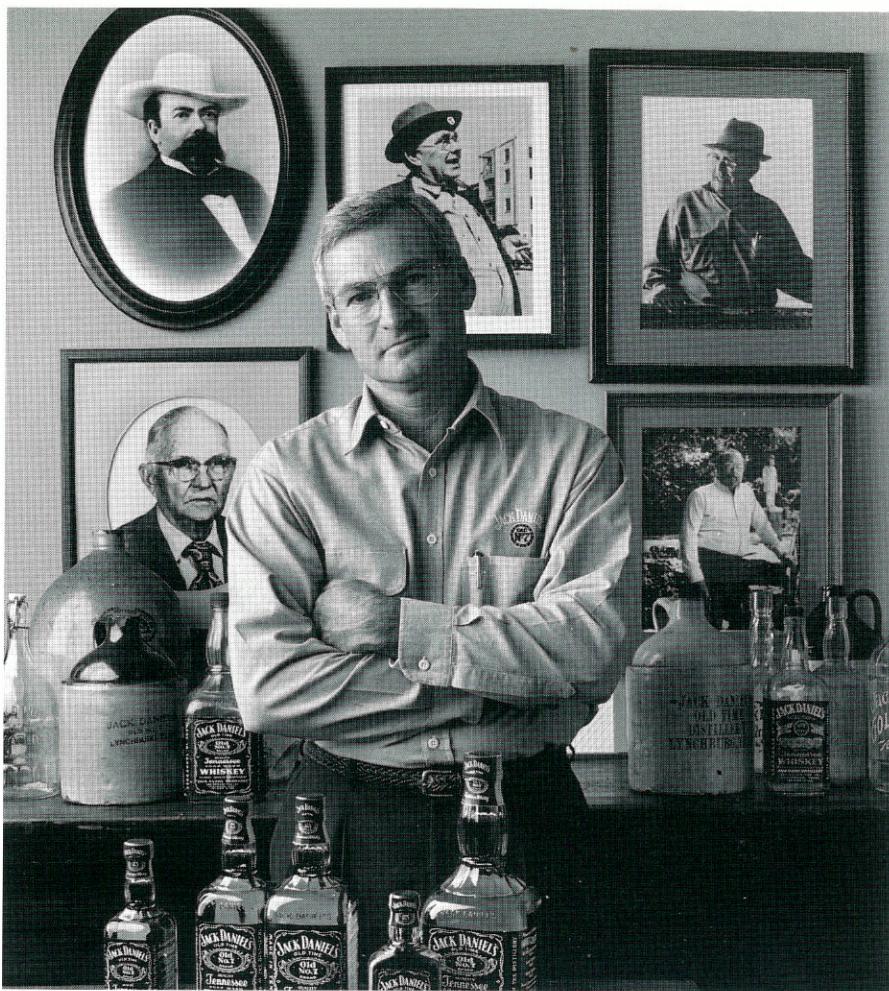
MIAMI BIBLIOGRAPHY

Created and compiled by Susan Weiss. Miami: Historical Association of Southern Florida, 1996. 153 pages. \$9.95 cloth.

Released in conjunction with the Miami Centennial celebration in 1996, the *Miami Bibliography* is a wonderful resource to the history of our unique city. Composed of extensive entries, the bibliography covers a wide range of topics from Arts to Vice and provides a valuable resource of books and magazine articles on the city of Miami. This research tool also features twenty historical images of South Florida, including photographs and postcards illustrating the theme of each chapter, from Climate and Economic Conditions to Housing and Transportation.

The periodical and book entries in the *Miami Bibliography* also cover Dade County and its separate municipalities. Susan Weiss, librarian at the Florida International University and creator of the bibliography, located older articles from the 1930s to the 1970s not generally found in databases and other computer indexes, while adding references from the 1980s and 1990s for comprehensive coverage. Magazine and journal articles, books and individual chapters, federal government publications and other reports are also included.

To order your copy of *Miami Bibliography*, contact the Indies Company Museum Store at (305) 375-1622. Historical Association of Southern Florida members receive a special 25 % discount on this centennial publication.



Clockwise from top left, that's Jack Daniel, Jess Motlow, Lem Tolley, Frank Bobo and Jess Gamble. (Jimmy's in the middle.)

JACK DANIEL'S HEAD DISTILLER, Jimmy Bedford, has lots of folks looking over his shoulder.

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A Slave Ship Speaks

THE WRECK OF THE HENRIETTA MARIE



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Historical Museum of Southern Florida, February 14 – May 4, 1997

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