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James M. Ingram M.D.

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# *DR. HOWELL TYSON LYKES*

## *FOUNDER OF AN EMPIRE*

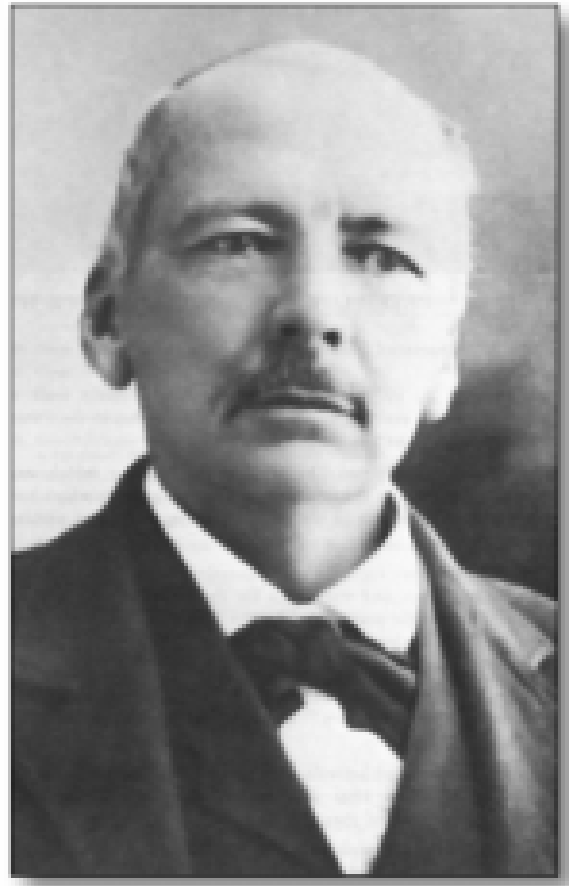
By James M. Ingram, M.D.

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Among the physicians of pioneer Florida were several whose greatest and most lasting achievements lay far outside the field of medicine. Dr. John Gorrie of Apalachicola invented the ice-making machine. His fellow townsman, Dr. Alvan Wentworth Chapman, wrote the classic textbook in botany, *Flora of the Southern United States*. Dr. John P. Wall planned Florida's present major highway system, served as mayor of Tampa and excelled as a meteorologist. Dr. Henry Perrine imported to southern Florida from Yucatan many of the plants now considered to be "native" to this state. Dr. Abel S. Baldwin designed Jacksonville's harbor and was elected president of the first railroad connecting Jacksonville and Pensacola. Of these talented Floridians, the physician who practiced the shortest length of time and left the most enduring material accomplishments was Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes of Brooksville and Tampa.

Dr. Lykes was born in Columbia, S.C. on Aug. 25, 1846, the son of Frederick and Margaret Howell (Tyson) Lykes. Frederick's family had immigrated from the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland in the mid-18th Century. Their family estate "Lykesland" in Congaree Township, S.C., was a portion of the land they obtained by royal Bounty Grant from King George II in 1750. The family name was spelled as Liks, Lix, Lyks and in other forms.<sup>1</sup>

In the belief that Margaret Lykes had tuberculosis, the family moved to Florida in 1851, purchasing 500 acres of land at "Spring Hill" west of Pierceville, now called Brooksville. Frederick Lykes, already educated as a teacher, established and built the first school in Hernando County. With foresight, he had brought along orange seeds



**DR. HOWELL TYSON LYKES**



Fig. 2 -Franklin Street, looking north at Washington Street, about 1890. Dr. Lykes' Almeria Hotel, (right) named for his wife, was Tampa's first three-story brick structure. Sand streets and wooden sidewalks served the center of town.

imported from China, and planted the early seedling orange groves in that area.<sup>2</sup>

Howell Tyson, the third of four children, was five years old when the family moved to Florida. He studied first at home, then in the school at Piereeville. He was an "energetic, quiet and somber" lad who was by far the best student in his father's school. At an early age he took interest in his father's activities in cotton, timber and cattle.

Barely old enough to serve in the Civil war, he joined the Confederate company commanded by his brother-in-law, Judge Wall. He was captured by Union forces and released in 1865 at Bay Port, Fla.<sup>3</sup> After the war, by unknown impetus, he decided to study medicine. He was graduated from

Charleston Medical College in the late 1860s.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to Brooksville, he engaged in an arduous country practice, traveling by horseback over the sparsely settled country to visit patients. Money was not plentiful and bills were more often paid in oranges, potatoes and corn. There was no hospital. Surgery was limited and crude. Few specific drugs were known. As few physicians in that era were willing to do, Dr. Lykes faced honestly the limitations of available therapy and shared the same question as his kinsman, Dr. John P. Wall: "Is there any evidence that the average duration of life has been lengthened by our superior skill in the treatment of disease? On the other hand, is there not considerable ground for the belief that thousands of lives have been sacrificed by the exhibition of our remedies?"<sup>5</sup>

After two years of practice, he turned his patients over to another kinsman-by-marriage, Dr. Sheldon Stringer, Sr., and channeled his energy and ambition into other pursuits. He first turned to the cedar logging industry, as cedar was much in demand for pencils in America and Europe. Huge cedar logs were cut from the swamps and Indian mounds of coastal Hernando and Citrus counties, and were floated down the Chassahowitzka and Weekiwachee Rivers to the head of Crystal River for milling. Additional tracts of land were acquired along the coast and were converted to pasture after logging was completed.

In 1874, Dr. Lykes, then age 28, married Almeria Belle McKay, daughter of Tampa shipmaster and exporter, Captain James McKay. Two years later, in 1876, on the death of his father, Dr. Lykes inherited Spring Hill and other property. All of the

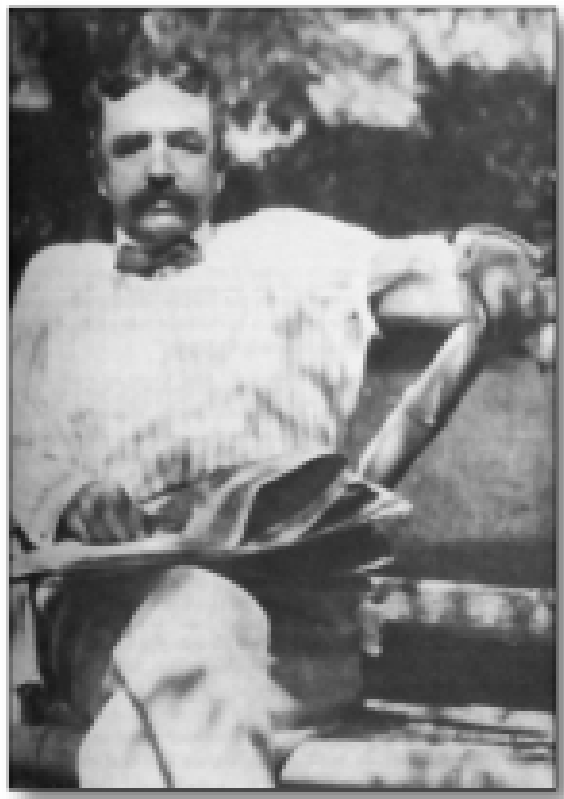


Fig. 4. -Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes on the lawn of his home about 1894

### Cattle Notice.

ALL PERSONS ARE HEREBY forbidden to use, purchase, selling, driving or shipping any cattle of the following marks and brands except by permission from me or my authorized agent.

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GEORGE GILLET and A. D. POMPEN are my Agents in Hernando county, JAMES M. THURNE in Manatee county, and THOMAS BIRNBAUM, in Levy county.

The above named persons are solely authorized to catch and brand, pen, drive or ship the cattle in their respective ranges. All the above marks and brands run into the above list in this list.

H. T. LYKES.  
Brooksville, Fla., Oct. 24, 1879.

Fig. 3-Newspapers often carried Cattle Notices, displaying the owners' ear croppings and flank brands. Violators usually responded to reason, but were occasionally shot.

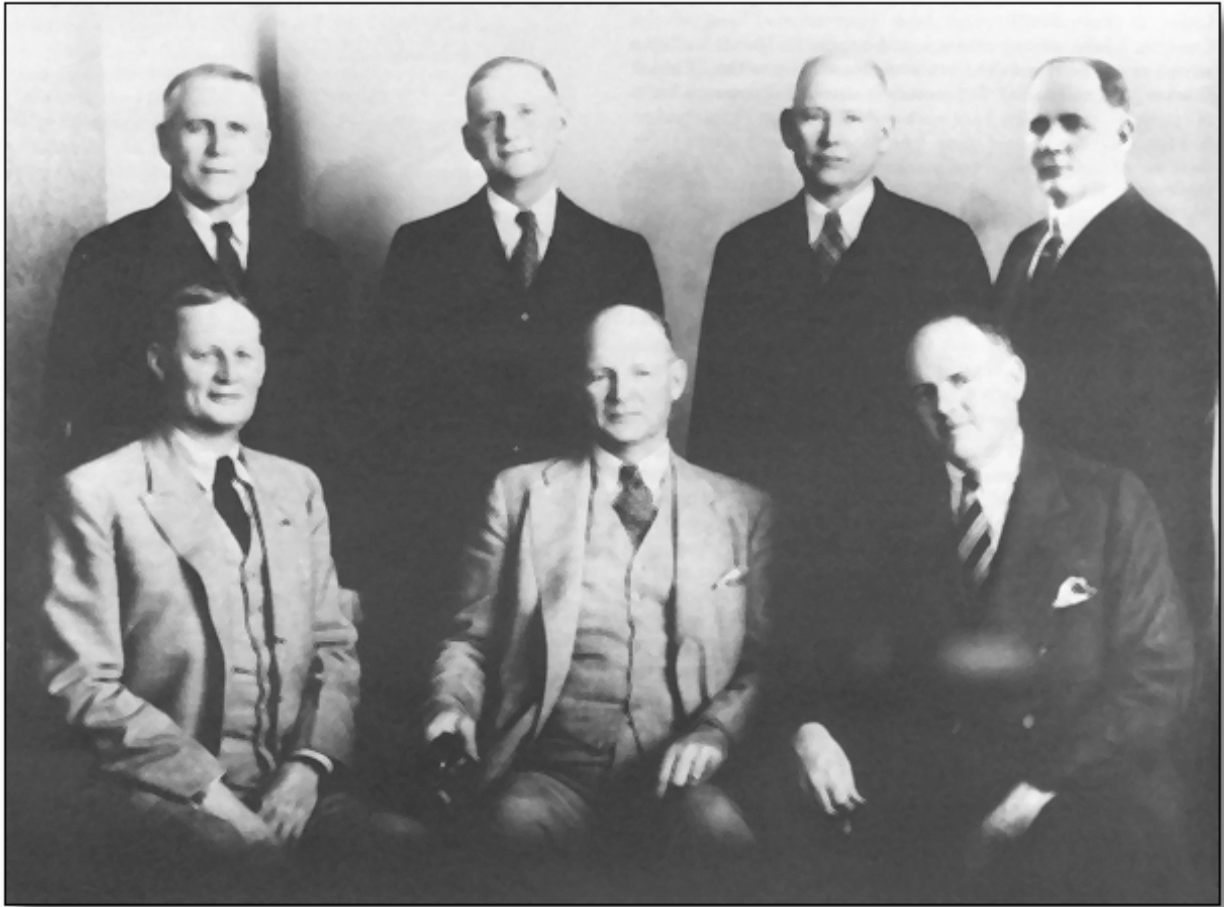


Fig. 5.-A rare portrait of the seven Lykes brothers made in 1940. Standing (from left) are James McKay, John Wall, Frederick Eugene and Lipscomb Goodwin (Dick). Seated are Howell Tyson Jr., Thompson Mayo and Joseph Taliaferro. Dick's picture was skillfully added from another portrait by photographer Carl Blakeslee. The last surviving brother, Joseph, died in 1967

eight Lykes children, a daughter and seven sons, were born at Spring Hill between 1877 and 1888. Their names, in order of birth, were: Matilda McKay; Frederick Eugene; Howell Tyson Jr.; James McKay; Lipscomb Goodwin (Dick); Thompson Mayo; John Wall, and Joseph Taliaferro.

During the decade between 1868-1878, the Cuban insurrection against Spain was setting the stage for a boom of the cattle industry in South Florida, and for the good fortune of Dr. Lykes and other cattlemen. Most of the cattle in Cuba were destroyed in the fighting and there was constant demand for restocking of the herds. Dr. Lykes' interests in cattle and land grew. His cattle soon ranged in an area from present Citrus

County, over the western part of Hernando, Pasco, Hillsborough and Pinellas counties and as far south as Largo.

It is of incidental interest that the birth of Florida's only set of quintuplets occurred on Lykes property, the "Lykes Lemon Grove," just north of Bay Port in 1860. The mother, Mrs. Joe Goethe, described as "less than average size, and not very robust," was attended by Dr. Sheldon Stringer Sr. The quintuplets, all boys, were perfectly formed at birth, but all died in infancy." <sup>6</sup>

Beginning in 1874, Dr. Lykes served two terms in the Florida legislature as senator representing Hernando, Citrus and Pasco counties. Legislative process was evidently

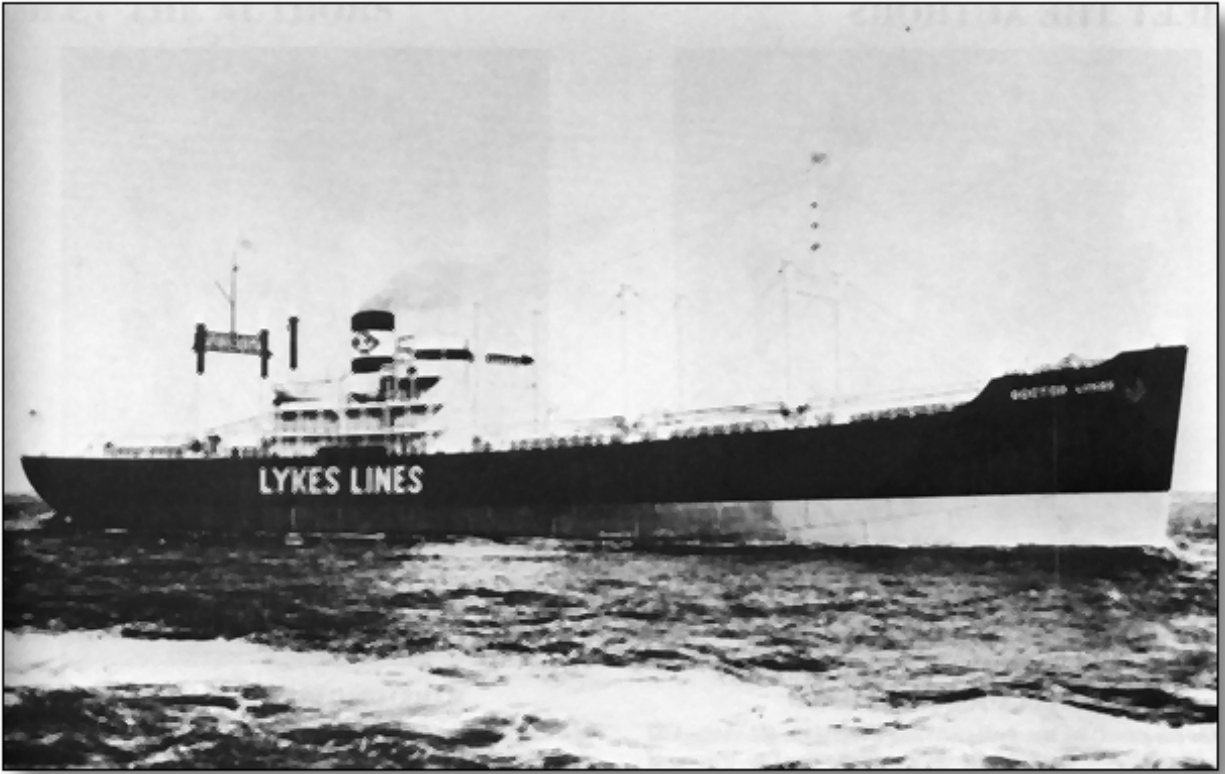


Fig. 6-The present S.S. Doctor Lykes, a C-3 cargo-passenger liner, could easily carry the original schooner Dr. Lykes on her foredeck.

more leisurely in that day. The Sunland Tribune of March 1, 1879 reported that the legislature adjourned for three days in order that the members could attend the State Fair at Gainesville. Dr. Lykes was listed as having won three "diplomas" and cash prizes for his "Brahmin cattle" at the fair, proving the presence of Brahma cattle in Florida at that early date.

Until 1880, Dr. Lykes was largely a producer of cattle, which he sold at Tampa or Punta Rassa. Later, in partnership with Captain W. H. Towles of Punta Rassa, he began to export cattle to Havana for sale. Their first two boats were the 109 foot motor schooner, Dr. Lykes (Fig. 1) and the little steamer Fanita. The Fanita had been built by the Vanderbilt family as a private yacht. The bones of her hull can still be

found rusting on a sandspit east of Tampa's Seddon Island.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the Lykes cattle, other herds were purchased as far south as Lee County and the Kissimmee River for export.

In 1886 Dr. Lykes built Tampa's first three-story brick building, the Almeria Hotel. It was built on his wife's birthplace and was named for her. This building, on the northeast corner of Franklin and Washington Streets, is now remodeled and serves as the modern office of Lykes Bros., Inc.

Dr. Lykes was 40 years old at this time, of medium height, slender of build, restlessly energetic, solemn, taciturn and sometimes stern. His eldest son, Fred, recalls, "My father, if anything, was an efficient disciplinarian. Each of us from the time we were five years old had our regular duties to

perform that no one else was permitted to do for us. As we grew older our responsibility was increased. He taught us early to act on our own judgement and initiative. If we erred in our judgement there was no fuss or criticism from him. When he was in the house, peace, quiet and harmony reigned." He describes his mother as having "personal charm, sympathetic understanding, patience and spiritual beauty.

This home life, inspiration, and business training that we got from our parents at this age has been invaluable to us."<sup>8</sup>

After the disastrous freeze of 1894-1895, which killed most of the citrus groves in the state, the Lykes family acquired an entire section of land and built a new home at Ballast Point, overlooking Hillsborough Bay just south of Tampa. This home now is occupied by a granddaughter, Mrs. Chester H. Ferguson, and her family. Just north of the house, where Tampa Yacht and Country Club now stands, Dr. Lykes built a long dock "three steers wide" for the loading of cattle upon ships. Thus he became the only cattle exporter who shipped virtually from his front yard.

The Tampa Interbay Peninsula in those days was still much in its primitive state. Nature had not been gentle to this land. The entire peninsula, up to present-day Kennedy Boulevard, had been inundated by bay water during Tampa's worst hurricane, Sept. 25, 1848.<sup>9</sup> The devastating drought of 1860 so parched the area that only 3,500 of the 8,000 cattle in pasture there survived.<sup>10</sup> Later a hand-hewn rail fence was built across the peninsula from Hillsborough Bay to Old Tampa Bay, to contain the cattle. The present Bay-to-Bay Boulevard follows the route of this fence."<sup>11</sup> By the time the Lykes family moved to Ballast Point in 1895, H. B. Plant had built his rickety railroad spur to an

embryo Port Tampa. There was little else on the Interbay Peninsula except a few cracker shacks, varying numbers of range cows and astronomical numbers of rattlesnakes.

Cattle business was the big business on the West Coast. The Savannah News of Oct. 25, 1879 listed the following shipments of cattle to Cuba: "Ziba King, 6,000 head; Jake Summerlin, 7,000 head; Dr. Lykes, 10,000 head." This trade had a profound effect on the money in use in the area. Both Cubans and Floridians distrusted Spanish bank notes, and had little more respect for the American dollar. They dealt primarily in gold Spanish doubloons, worth \$16.80 each. These bright, soft coins were always measured by weighing because they wore easily. McKay and Grismer, respected Tampa historians, each state that for about 20 years "gold Spanish doubloons became more common in Tampa and the cattle country than American dollars."<sup>12,13</sup>

D. B. McKay relates how Dr. Lykes and his inseparable Negro companion-servant, Charlie Johnson, handled this heavy loot.

"A consignment of cattle was loaded on a ship at the Ballast Point docks. The Cuban buyer paid Dr. Lykes the agreed price-enough gold coins to fill an Octagon soap box. Dr. Lykes slept in his nearby camp that night using the box of money with a saddle blanket over it for a pillow.

"Cowboys slept all around him, but he felt no uneasiness-his faithful servant, Charlie Johnson, was-on guard duty day and night ready to do battle with man or beast ... Charlie was a peculiar figure, much over six feet tall and so knock-kneed that he walked with difficulty. He always rode a frisky little mule and his feet almost dragged the ground.'<sup>14</sup> The son of the freed slaves of Dr. Lykes' father, Charlie was an important

force in the rearing and training of Dr. Lykes' own sons.

The stockmen, often termed "cattle kings," were the dominant figures of west Florida's most colorful era. The law of the open range prevailed from Palatka to Lake Okeechobee throughout the 19th Century. The Western Plains provided no more thrilling stories of cattle drives, open-range feuds and shootouts than did Florida. Newspapers carried "Cattle Warnings" displaying the owners' brands and ear croppings. These warnings usually could be enforced with labor and reasoning, but, when not, with revolvers.

The names of the famous cattlemen were equally picturesque-names like Ziba King of Fort Ogden, Captain John T. Lesley of Fort Brooke and Jake Summerlin, "King of the Crackers." Jake, among others, could handle an 18-foot bullwhip as well as any cowhand (The crack of this whip gave the "Florida Cracker" his nickname). Big stockmen shared the common traits of extreme individuality, hard work and high living. The unbroken flow from Havana of gold coins, fine goods and aged spirits made their way of life profitable and pleasurable. Dr. Lykes fitted well in this company.

Such a full life was not allowed to interfere with the training, education and discipline of the seven sons. As each achieved his early teens, he was sent during the summers to learn the family business as a cowboy, hotel clerk or deckhand. Their activities were kept under the stern eye of the doctor. His counsel was readily available, pertinent and succinct. It usually ended with the same phrase, "Stick together whatever you do, and take care of your sister." The maturing and molding together of this strong family were greater achievements for Dr. Lykes than were any of his economic successes.

In time, the seven sons and daughter "Tillie" were graduated from various colleges of their own choosing. Each of the boys returned and entered the family cattle and shipping business. After the close of the Spanish-American War in 1900 the two eldest sons, Fred and H. T., then aged 22 and 21, respectively, were sent to Havana, adequately financed, to open an office. There they chartered the parent company, Lykes Bros., Inc. Both survived yellow fever under the care of the famous Cuban, Dr. Carlos Finlay. That same year, Walter Reed proved Finlay's 19-year-old theory that the Aedes mosquito was the vector of yellow fever.

The older sons were soon joined by brothers James and Lipscomb. They bought and consolidated Cuban ranches, built Cuba's first meat packing plant, chartered ships and imported a steady stream of cattle from Florida, Texas, Central and South America.

In early 1906 the sons were notified that Dr. Lyke's health was failing rapidly. They were called home after his death, of unknown cause at Ballast Point on May 14, 1906. The Tampa Times of May 16, 1906 records that the family, accompanied by "a large concourse of friends," traveled to Spring Hill by special train for the funeral. Almeria McKay Lykes was to survive her husband for 20 years, providing wise and gentle guidance for her family.

The firm of Lykes Bros. was incorporated in Florida in 1910, with the seven brothers and F. A. Morris, who had been with them from the start, as owners. The third brother, James, who had opened an office in Galveston in 1903, was joined by the youngest brother Joseph. Brothers Howell, Thompson and John managed the Florida interests. More ships were bought or



chartered, mostly by James and Joe in Texas, for shipment of cattle and general cargo.

Though quite dissimilar in personality, the brothers were bound together by genuine affection, mutual toleration and intense family loyalty. A friend or enemy of one brother held the same role with the others. When the entire family convened in Tampa each February, the brothers invariably met each other with an embrace, the traditional Spanish "abrazo."

Gradually the shipping activity overshadowed that of cattle. World War I caused great expansion in the steamship line. In 1922, Lykes Bros. Steamship Co., with James as president, was created and set apart from the other interests. Smaller steamship companies were purchased and worldwide service established. All ships of the Lykes line were named for members of the family or of the company. Far greater growth occurred during and after World War 11, even though 21 Lykes ships were sunk. One of the great mysteries of the War was the disappearance of the S. S. Tillie Lykes in the West Indies, without a message or trace."<sup>15</sup>

Today, with 54 ships, Lykes Bros. Steamship Co., is the largest American-flag shipping line. Lykes Bros., Inc. is the biggest producer of cattle and is the largest meat packer in Florida. It is also a volume producer of cattle in Texas. Recently the company has become one of Florida's major growers and processors of citrus. Other interests include banking, insurance and real estate.

These various and widespread organizations are still closely held by the equally varied members of the Lykes family, now 84 in number. The sons, grandsons, nephews and sons-in-law who guide the family businesses are as dissimilar in inclination, temperament and physical appearance as were the original seven brothers. Yet few have ever chosen to leave. Fortune Magazine.<sup>16</sup> aptly describes the Lykes as "an engaging lot. They have mutual respect and individual independence. They seem to have an honest liking for each other." With rare accomplishment, they have indeed been able to "stick together," the one great desire of Dr. Lykes -founder of their empire.

*Grateful acknowledgment for aid in the preparation of this manuscript is made to Mrs. Genevieve Parkhill Lykes, Mrs. Louise Lykes Ferguson, Mr. Charles Parkhill Lykes and Tampa historian Mr. Theodore Lesley.*

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- <sup>5</sup> Ingram, J. M.: John Perry Wall-A Man for All Seasons  
J. Florida M. A. 53:709-717 (August) 1966.
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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 393.
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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., Vol. 11, p. 325
- <sup>15</sup> Lykes Fleet Flashes, October 1950, p. 5
- <sup>16</sup> Lincoln, Freeman: Fortune Magazine, February 1954, pp. 108-114, 202-212 (by permission).