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THE GREAT FREEZE OF 1894-95 IN PINELLAS COUNTY

By Michael L. Sanders

Paradoxically, for a state that worships the sun and its warming rays, the history of Florida can be measured in freezes. In 1835 there was a severe freeze crippling the earliest citrus trade begun in Florida probably around 1800. At the time, some believed a preposterous notion that the freeze was caused by a large iceberg lying somewhere off St. Augustine. This event was thought of as a fluke that would certainly never duplicate itself again in Florida's history. It was, in fact, years before a freeze of this magnitude happened again in the Sunshine State. However, the severe winters of 1876-77 and 1880-81 proved it was possible. Much of the fruit north of the "frost line" was lost during these seasons. But, unquestionably, the most prominent freeze in Florida's history was the "Great Freeze of 1894-95." It was to the South what the blizzard of 1888 and the winter of 1978-79 was to the North. A quote from Caroline Mays' History of Florida gives an insight into the severity of this freeze:

The Freeze of 1894 and the storm of 1895 will be remembered as the coldest days ever known in Florida. The orange crop was destroyed and many groves were killed. Many fruit growers and gardeners lost their entire income.¹

This essay will examine the impact of this freeze on Florida in general and then, specifically, on Pinellas County, which, in 1895, was still a part of Hillsborough County.

The commercial origins of the Florida citrus industry can be traced to about 1800. During this time, the most prolific areas of cultivation were found around St. Augustine, Jacksonville, the upper St. John's River and other major centers of population in north Florida. The freeze of 1835 dealt the citrus industry a mild setback, but after that little stood in the way of orange culture in Florida.

A few groves went a long way toward promoting Florida citrus during the early commercial period of the 1800's. One grove belonged to a gentleman named Douglas Dummett. The Dummett grove achieved recognition when, after the freeze of 1835, buds were taken from its trees to rejuvenate other groves in north Florida. One of the oldest and largest groves in the state, the Dummett grove came to bring a dollar more a box than any other fruit in New York City in the late 1830's. Another



Harriet Beecher Stowe. Steel engraving circa 1860.

(courtesy of USF Special Collections)

prominent grove belonged to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mrs. Stowe, along with her husband, Professor Calvin Stowe, bought about thirty acres in the village of Mandarin in 1868. After several successful seasons of citrus culture a label marked “Oranges from Harriet Beecher Stowe—Mandarin, Florida” became a prestige symbol in the North. The name “Mandarin” is thought by many to be a synonym for “tangerine.” But tangerines are actually only a variety of mandarin that originated in Tangiers. All mandarins have the so-called zipper skin that grow around the fruit like a loose-fitting glove.²



Harriet Beecher Stowe’s winter residence in Mandarin, Fla. showing groves in background, circa 1900.

(courtesy of USF Special Collections)

After the Civil War, Florida citrus began to accelerate dramatically with the infusion of northern capital. By the late 1870’s and 1880’s railroads launched extensive programs of land development, no small part of which involved the shipment and marketing of citrus products. The financial panic of 1873 caused many northern businessmen to seek other opportunities for investment.³ A myriad of prospective grove owners moved to north and central Florida with grandiose ideas of exploiting this new industry. “Orange fever” was encouraged by rumors which suggested that a few planted trees would yield the grower a high profit, while the bulk of his time could be spent hunting and fishing. “There is nothing to prevent the establishment in Florida of a race of rich men who will rank with the plantation princes of the old South,” *The Atlanta Constitution* predicted.⁴

The following table compiled by the State Agricultural Department of Tallahassee demonstrates the phenomenal rise in orange production during the late 1880’s:

Year	Number of Boxes Produced⁵
1884	625,000
1885	900,000
1886	1,250,000
1887	1,450,000
1888	1,900,000
1889	2,664,791
1890	3,023,044
1891	3,585,564
1892	3,657,075
1893	4,163,849
1894	5,000,000



Aftermath of Great Freeze (1894-1895) in Central Florida

(photo from Stokes Collection, courtesy of USF Special Collections)

By 1894, orange production had topped the 5 million box mark. The freeze of 1835 and severe winters of the 1880's had done little to dampen the spirits or diminish the production of citrus in Florida. But just when production had reached the half-billion milestone, the Great Freeze of 1894-95 dealt a chilling blow to the entire citrus industry of Florida.

On December 27, 1894, the first blizzard passed through the state. With winds of twenty-five to thirty miles per hour, the killing frosts accounted for temperatures of eleven degrees in Tallahassee, fourteen degrees at Jacksonville, and nineteen degrees in Tampa.⁶ The fruit was frozen right on the tree in most groves in central and north Florida. The pulp, upon close scrutiny, resembled watery snow. However, more importantly, the sap in the trees was not frozen to the core.

Although understandably depressing to many growers, this first freeze still left some hope. The weather quickly improved and high temperatures followed the freeze. The sap, repressed by the freeze, began to flow and by late January sprouts could be seen emerging from the trees. A second harvest perhaps could be salvaged.

Then came another hard freeze on February 7, 8, and 9. It was said that the first freeze destroyed the wealth of a year and the second wiped out the accumulation of a lifetime. This February freeze finished what the December freeze had begun. Not only young seedlings but

older trees planted fifty years prior to that date were frozen to the core. Branches broke off like pretzels.

Panic swept the state as growers left plows in the middle of the fields, houses half-constructed, and affairs undone to return to the North. It is said that almost half the homes in North Florida were abandoned at this time. Louise McMullen, a Largo pioneer, remembered her relatives in North Florida after the freeze:

Old man Dent had a grove south of Jacksonville, around Ocala. It froze solid, so he locked the door of the house and never went back.⁷

Only the hardest pioneers and those too poor to move remained on their groves. In the aftermath of the freeze, however, they were consoled by one thought. The freeze of 1835 was as cold or colder than the current freeze, and the old seedlings, thirty to thirty-five years ago, were also destroyed in that freeze. The citrus industry totally recovered from the 1835 freeze, so it was possible to also survive this one, especially since newer and more modern agricultural techniques were being employed every day in the industry.

Pinellas County prior to the “Great Freeze of 1894-95” was extolled as an ideal section for citrus culture. Moreover, it was described by northern physicians as an ideal place to live. Dr. W. C. Van Bibber of Baltimore gave this report to the American Medical Association after a search had begun to locate the perfect, healthful location to begin a city:

Where should Health City be built? Overlooking the deep Gulf of Mexico, with the broad waters of a beautiful bay surrounding it; with but little now upon its soil but the primal forests—there is a large sub-peninsula, Point Pinellas, waiting the hand of improvement.⁸

The 1874 *Clearwater Times* further described the advantages of the Gulf Coast:

The Gulf Coast, South of Withlacoochee River which is but little North of the altitude 28° North, possesses many advantages over any other locality. The healthfulness of its coast, quality of soil, its comparative freedom from the annoyance of insects, the quality, size and flavor of the fruit, the convenience to transportation and great outlet to the market, the excellent water and the absence of the orange insect are some of the advantages claimed for this coast.⁹

Perhaps a less biased perspective of the advantages of the Gulf Coast over other areas of Florida may be found in this quote from an 1874 *East Florida Banner*:

The Climate on the Gulf Coast is mild and equable, and the productions are rich and varied. The Gulf Coast seems to be the native home of the orange. They flourish in most any condition and are seldom touched by frost [sic].¹⁰

These accounts shed some light on why Pinellas County withstood the calamity which befell the State of Florida in the winter of 1894-95. The geographic advantage of being a peninsula

surrounded by water and the climatic advantage of being generally warmer than north Florida helped lessen the severity of the freeze which destroyed the entire industry in some other parts of Florida. Nevertheless, Pinellas County suffered considerable damage. There was disagreement on the part of local historians as to the degree of damage left by the freeze. W. L. Straub, a highly respected local historian, suggested that Pinellas County suffered almost no damage from the 1894-95 freeze. He wrote:

Pinellas County, protected by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the warm breezes from these great waters, and on the East by Tampa Bay, long ago proved that here the citrus grove is safer than in any other part of the state. In the Great Freeze of 1894-95 when the industry was about wiped out in Florida, it was the Pinellas groves that supplied the surviving stock to rebuild the industry in other counties. It is said that in Pinellas County trees showed practically no damage from the low temperatures and had these then been properly marked and buds taken from them to rebuild other groves, Florida might now have the citrus trees which would resist any normal freeze of this state.¹¹

Straub's statement that Pinellas citrus suffered "practically no damage" appears too optimistic an assessment, as interviews demonstrated. When asked to comment on Straub's descriptions, Nancy McMullen Meador of Clearwater, responded:

Who said that? That's nonsense. The young trees were killed to the ground; maybe some old seedlings twenty to thirty years old weren't ruined.¹²

But later in the interview she conceded that her uncle suffered little real damage to his grove:

Uncle Birt McMullen had a grove at Badwater back then. This property was beautiful with huge oak trees and a creek running through it. During the freeze of 1894-95 much of the local citrus froze; his didn't freeze at all. Ordinarily citrus brought one dollar or a dollar and a half a crate; after the freeze he got fifteen dollars a crate.¹³

It was evident from this interview that the actual damage on a county level would be difficult to ascertain. Some groves suffered partial damage, some total. Estimates of loss varied from grove to grove depending upon its location in the county. Because Pinellas County is a microcosm of the State of Florida and sometimes known as "Little Florida," a geographic and climatic parallel may be drawn between the two. Florida is hillier and cooler around Tallahassee than Miami, which is flat and warm. North Pinellas below Tarpon Springs is hilly and a few degrees cooler than Point Pinellas which is located on the southernmost tip of the Peninsula. The damage following the freeze was most extensive in north Florida as it was in north Pinellas. The damage in south Florida was less as was the case in south Pinellas. This might also explain Straub's judgement, his perspective coming from "down county" where the groves suffered the least damage.

One grove which emerged unscathed belonged to Philip J. Bayly. This grove, sitting high up on Bayly's Bluff, where present day Belleair Bluffs is located, was the most prominent of its day in Pinellas County. Bayly pioneered mail order fruit packing and was one of the first to deal

exclusively in fancy gift-wrapped fruit. Thomas Edison visited his grove several times en route to Ft. Myers. “The Wizard of Menlo Park” was not alone in his interest in the grove. At the turn of the century, the *West Hillsboro Press* wrote effusively of Bayly’s grove:

There is probably no grove in Florida so well and favorably known on the gilt edge of the market as the Sandsfoot Grove. The proprietor, Philip J. Bayly, has, by a careful, intelligent and businesslike course, demonstrated the possibilities of an orange grove in Florida. He gets the very highest price paid in the markets always, and chooses his own customers.¹⁴

Any man this astute in business probably took precautions before a freeze. His son, Taver Bayly, recalled how his father survived the freeze:

My father planted a grove in 1890 and had a special method of wrapping the young seedlings in Croaker (fertilizer) sacks. When the '95 freeze came, two things saved the grove. A Northwest wind off the Gulf held the temperatures up and the wrapped trees allowed them to thaw slowly when the sun rose the following day. A lot of trees on the other groves were ruined at sunrise because they thawed too quick and split immediately in two. I believe Crescent City on the East Coast and Clearwater on the West were the only two areas to survive the freeze.¹⁵

Nevertheless reports of the effects of the freeze varied. A July 17, 1897 *Tampa Morning Tribune* article observed:

The cold wave of 1895 did but little damage to the old seedling orange trees on the West Coast nor were the budded trees hurt as badly as those further inland.¹⁶

In contrast to this account, Mrs. Dafny Anderson, whose relatives lived inland and suffered considerably more than Coastal growers, remembered years later:

Cousin Rosa said when she was a young girl she lived in a home south of where Largo High School is now. After the freeze, she said snow was piled up against the chimney of her house and most of the nearby groves were destroyed.¹⁷

Obviously the freeze affected not only the citrus growers but all other businesses with whom the growers had dealings. In this instance, merchants operating largely on credit felt the immediate impact of the calamity. The following man spoke of his uncle’s grocery store which operated mostly on credit during the 1880’s:

My uncle had a grocery store in Clearwater at that time and he had to close up on account of that freeze. No one could pay [his] bill because payment was dependent upon the sale of citrus.¹⁸

The freeze affected other inhabitants of Pinellas County. Some recognized the immediate hardships encountered by the freeze, but looked at it from a larger perspective. Nancy McMullen Meador reflected this positive note:

This was a turning point in Pinellas' economic condition. In a way, the freeze was a Godsend because the people then had to find other ways of making a living, like truck farming.¹⁹

An item in an 1897 edition of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* supported Mrs. Meador's view and offered proof that other cash crops took the place of citrus during this time:

Circumstances alter cases and in this instance, the orange business of the state was cut short, but it made business better in other channels. For instance it put the growers to thinking and speculating and other as remunerative crops were tried and successfully made, which readily brought in handsome prices. Take the tobacco crop as a single criterion. It has revolutionized the agricultural interests of the state and made people bright and prosperous and live towns out of dead ones.²⁰

A series of interviews Mrs. Meador conducted in 1950 for the *Clearwater Sun* revealed how families pulled together in hard times and subsisted on whatever was available at the time. Mrs. Carrie Burton Dieffenwieth spoke of the devastating freeze but told how a family kept from starving when a crisis arose:

The freeze of '95 killed everything growing. We learned to make one can of beef last for two meals for a big family. As Miss Julia put it, we learned to put potatoes and everything else we could find in it and therefore was born corned beef hash.²¹

The Harville family of Clearwater fell back on a second vocation to pull them through the freeze:

Of course the Harvilles suffered along with everyone else from the '94-'95 freeze. Everything was frozen to the ground; great big trees split in half. If my husband had not had a little income from being Deputy Sheriff I don't know what we would have done.²²

Capricious, indeed, was the freeze of 1894-95. While the effects upon Florida were devastating, research indicated that Pinellas groves recovered with surprising rapidity. Local newspaper reporters on the scene shortly after the freeze agreed on the speedy recovery. In 1897, the *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported:

A representative of the *Tribune* made a tour of the West Coast last week for the purpose of confirming or refuting the many glowing reports that are daily coming to us from that favored section of Hillsborough County, and we are pleased to say that we found that nothing had been exaggerated. The orange trees all along the Coast look finer, the tobacco crops better and the truck farms more numerous than in any section of the state yet visited by him.²³

A Tampa journalist provided this heartening report on the tiny community of Ozona:



Picking oranges, circa 1895

(courtesy of USF Special Collections)

Ozona, can with truth be designated as the “garden spot” of the West Coast. Last year there were over 2,000 boxes of oranges shipped from this section alone, and this year the fruit growers expect to double their figures. There are more large and bearing old seedling orange trees in and around Ozona than any other section of equal size on the West or East Coasts.²⁴

Several years later, the *West Hillsboro Press* made no mention of the freeze and noted the high fields of groves like Sandsfoot (Bayly Grove). Recently Sarah Mann from Palm Harbor (near Ozona) indicated her father's groves bore fruit at the turn of the century:

After the freeze, daddy budded the trees into lemon stock and replanted them. It takes about three to five years for them to bear. By 1902 we had fruit on our trees.²⁵

Although total figures on Pinellas County citrus production are incomplete for the years of the freeze, research showed that three of sixteen settlements on Pinellas Peninsula, Ozona, Largo and Dunedin produced over 15,000 boxes of citrus in 1896.²⁶ Much larger St. Petersburg to the south accounted for fruit shipments valued at \$250,000 in 1901-02; thus, it is reasonable to assume that in 1896 several thousand boxes were shipped from “down County.”²⁷ As the entire production for Florida was only 93,152 boxes for the same years, Pinellas accounted for a substantial part of



Gathering oranges, circa 1890's (before the freeze)

(courtesy of USF Special Collections)

the state output.²⁸ These figures suggest that Pinellas suffered less from the destructive freeze than many other parts of the state.

After the Great Freeze, the extensive damage to fruit in the north Florida counties caused the center of citrus culture to shift south a hundred miles or so. This relocation accounted for an influx of people into Pinellas County and increased citrus production during the years following the freeze. Karl Grismer has pointed out that “a number of growers in other parts of the state who had been frozen out came [to St. Petersburg] to make another start. They played an important part in developing the town.”²⁹

In 1897, the editors of the *Tampa Tribune* invited fellow journalists in Gainesville to “visit South Florida and see things the way they are, [they] will be one of the most ardent believers in better times in the country.”³⁰

Florida citrus production dropped from 5,000,000 boxes in 1894 to 46,580 in 1896. However, by 1901, the state had recovered once again reaching above the million box mark.³¹ The long-term effect on Pinellas County was positive. By 1912, the area was self-sufficient enough to split successfully from Hillsborough and form its own county. The road toward independence

was provided by those hardy citrus growers who brought Pinellas out of the Great Freeze of 1894-95.

¹ Caroline Mays Brevard, *History of Florida* (New York: American Book Company, 1904), p. 189.

² John McPhee, *Oranges*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), pp. 94-96.

³ George M. Barbour, *Florida— For Tourists, Invalids and Settlers* (New York: D. Appelton & Co., 1881), p. 240.

⁴ McPhee, *Oranges*, p. 98.

⁵ Edmund Kemper Broadus, "The Reclamation of an Industry," *The Gulf States Historical Magazine*, (May 1903): pp. 262-267.

⁶ Merlin G. Cox, *Florida: From Secession to Space Age*, (St. Petersburg, Florida: J. E. Dovell, 1974), P. 96-97.

⁷ Interview with Louise McMullen and Dafny Anderson of Largo on January 26, 1979.

⁸ Gloria Jahoda, *River of the Golden Ibis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 277.

⁹ *Clearwater Times*, June 27, 1874.

¹⁰ *East Florida Banner*, Jacksonville, June, 1874.

¹¹ W. L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County* (St. Augustine: The Record Company Printers, 1929), p. 82.

¹² Interview with Nancy McMullen Meador, Clearwater, Florida, February 1, 1979.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *West Hillsboro Press*, Clearwater, Florida, 1900-01.

¹⁵ Interview with Taver Bayly, Clearwater, January 26, 1979.

¹⁶ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 17, 1897.

¹⁷ Interview with Louise McMullen and Dafny Anderson, Largo, January 26, 1979.

¹⁸ Interview with Harold Wallace, Clearwater, January 31, 1979.

¹⁹ Interview with Nancy McMullen Meador, Clearwater, February 1, 1979.

²⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 17, 1897.

²¹ Interview with Carrie Burton Dieffenwieth of Largo by Nancy McMullen Meador for the *Clearwater Sun*, December 24, 1950.

²² Interview with Mrs. Carrie Harville of Clearwater by Nancy McMullen Meador for the *Clearwater Sun*, December 31, 1950.

²³ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 13, 1897.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1897.

²⁵ Interview with Sarah Mann, Palm Harbor, February 3, 1979.

²⁶ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 17, 1897.

²⁷ St. Petersburg Investment Co. *Progress & Possibilities of St. Petersburg* (1901), p. 31.

²⁸ Edmund Kemper Broadus, "The Reclamation of an Industry," *The Gulf States Historical Magazine*, (May 1903): 267.

²⁹ Karl Grismer, *History of St. Petersburg*, (Miami: Tourist Publishing Company, 1924), p. 14.

³⁰ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 17, 1897.

³¹ Edmund Kemper Broadus, "The Reclamation of an Industry," *The Gulf States Historical Magazine*, (May 1903): 262-267.