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Some historical accounts of the natural conditions in Tampa Bay and Hillsborough County

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SOME HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE NATURAL CONDITIONS
IN TAMPA BAY AND HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

COMPILED BY
MICHAEL HEERSCHAP

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION COMMISSION

Ca 1780

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Tampa Bay at one time was one of the best fishing grounds within the United States. The waters were so full of fish that they even impeded boats. The surrounding countryside was full of deer, wild hog, turkeys, quails and numerous other animals. But it is hard to comprehend this when we look at the present state of affairs in Tampa Bay.

This is a collection of accounts of persons visiting the bay area from as early as 1757. Various sportsmen and tourists which visited the bay area tell of unsurpassed fishing and hunting and oysters which were the finest on the continent. Fish were used a compost for the officers gardens at Fort Brooke because it was plentiful.

As we might expect as we read on in the literature we find that as Tampa grows, then the animals and fish which were so abundant slowly disappear. An interesting feature of these accounts are the stores told of mass killings of animals and birds for no reason except for fun. Also included are some tales of our notorious insect life and thunder-showers.

This report is a collection of some of the more interesting quotes from various sources. The source is given and then some time, a brief explanation of the article. After reading these one can almost imagine a totally different world where nature was plentiful and the people of the bay region enjoyed in its abundance.

From Havana to the Port of Tampa 1757: A Journal of the Surveys:
Atlantic Ocean - Northern Part by Senior Don Francisco Maria Celi,
 Pilot of the Royal Fleet. Translated by John Ware 1966.

This is an account of the original spanish exploration of the west coast of Florida. The port of Tampa refers to Tampa Bay.

"that near the one to the West there was good, very clear water. It appears, moreover, that the point is washed by a river through the center which runs to the other part as fresh and clear."

"The Large Pin Oak. Further to the SE is the mouth of a river which I called the River of Franco (Six Mile Creek). Between Key Cajigal and the coast, even up to the mouth of the river, there are keys, all formed by large oysters. These keys have small channels between them where smaller craft can pass."

This is the account of exploration up the Hillsborough River.

"In this position we found the channel of the river compacted with stones, which they call "The Waterfall."

Although the water does not come from a greater height, ⁵⁷ yet it in some manner appears forced into such condition by this layer of stones. Here we sojourn to examine the terrain of this position to which we arrived at exactly noon."

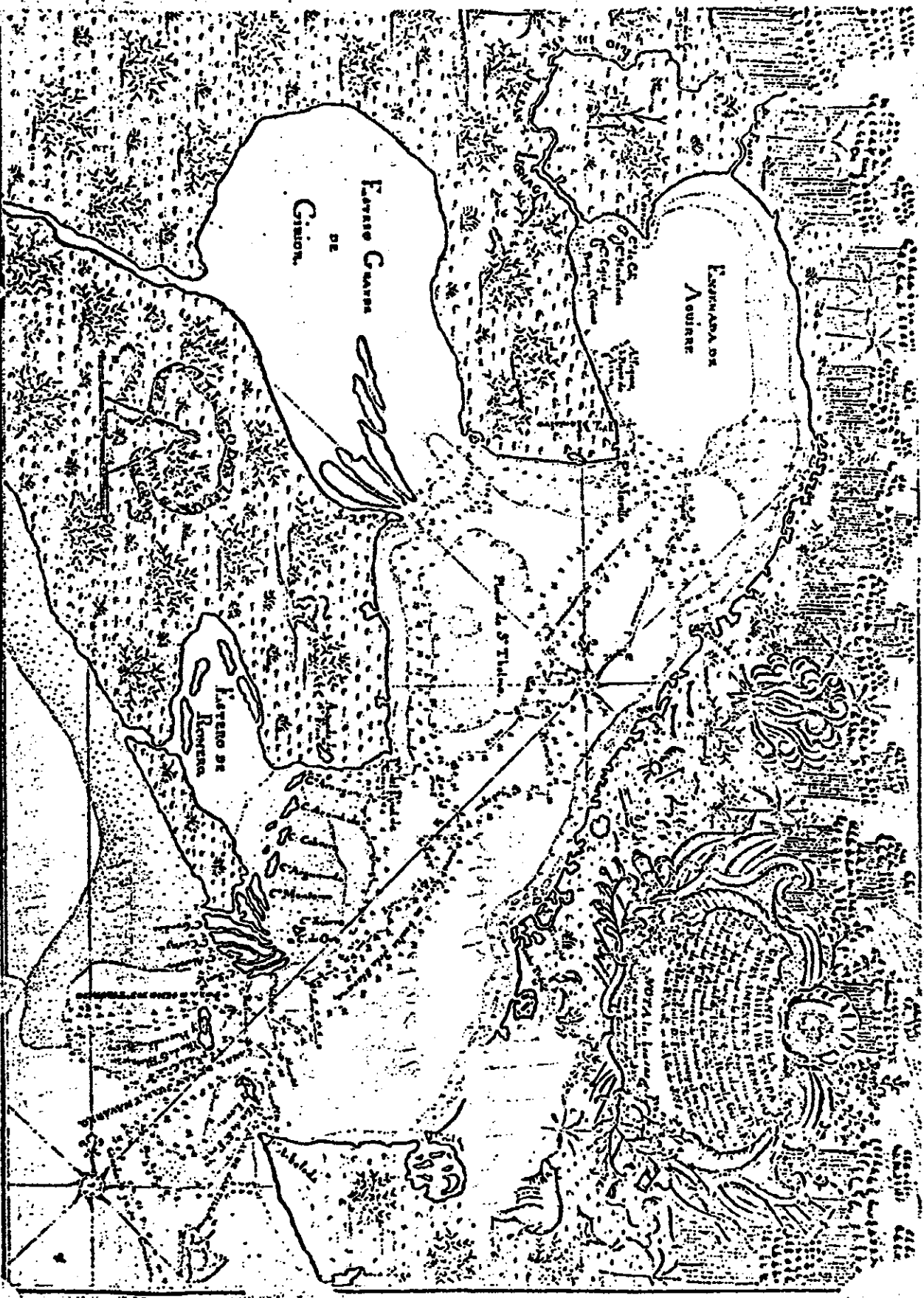
"The following four men: Don Jose Jimenez, Don Francisco Maria Celi, Don Juan Franco, and the carpenter of the Xebec, Francisco Diaz, accompanied by two Seamen, went toward the western edge of the river bottom. Penetrating this swamp about 1/2 league, they saw 33 trees of 20 to 26 inches in diameter, and from 35 to 36 cubits in length. At 3 o'clock the aforementioned men crossed over to the eastern edge, going

into the interior a little more than one mile. Upon walking along the river about 1 1/2 leagues, there was found in this distance 31 trees from 21 to 28 inches in diameter, and 34 to 38 cubits in length, suitable for main topmast yards of two pieces, and many for make-shift mainmasts."

"and then stopped for two hours to examine the countryside in which we had seen, in even more abundance, trees of a magnitude as reported earlier, at a distance from the river of about one mile".

"I report that the tide enters this river of Saint Julian and Arriaga (Hillsborough River) with a rise and fall inside of it for about a league and a half to two leagues, and in this distance the water remains brackish because it is mixed with that of the bay. Further upstream, however, the water is fresh and very delicate in taste. The crew reveled in it and all drank of it, for it was good as well as clear."

*Drank
water of
Hillsborough*



Autobiography of an English Soldier in the United States Army:

Comprising observations and advantages in the United States and

Mexico. Stringer and Townsend, New York 1853

This is an account of an English soldier who was stationed at Fort Brooke in present Tampa at about the time of the Mexican-American War.

"after a pleasant voyage of two days we anchored about seven or eight miles from the village and garrison in Tampa Bay, that being as near as vessels above the size of a light schooner can approach, on account of the extreme shoalness of the bay."

"Tampa Bay is a neat little village of wooden houses, situated at the mouth of the river Hillsboro, and close to the garrison. There is a small traffic carried on between it and the few scattered settlers of the neighborhood, who bring in their surplus produce and exchange it here for goods or money. Its situation is reckoned to be one of the most healthy and salubrious in Florida; but as the land in the vicinity is mostly of a poor quality, and as the bay is difficult of approach for shipping, it does not seem destined to rise very rapidly in importance."

*Described in
Tampa 1853*

"They ave game in abundance, herds of deer rom through the plains and glades, and crop their luxuriant herbage; numerous flocks of wild turkeys roost in the hummocks at night, and feed in the openings and pine barrens by day; and in the creeks and bays of the sea coast, or in the large fresh water lakes of the interior, incredible quantities of delicious fish are easily caught."

Alligators are numerous in the ponds and rivers of Florida, and may often be seen floating with the stream like the trunk of a tree, while watching for their prey, on the surface of the Hillsboro river, close to the garrison at Tampa Bay.

"There is an excellent oyster-bed on a sand bank in the bay, about six miles from the garrison; and occasionally a few of the men, having obtained the permission of the Quarter-Master, would take the barge and go down for a supply of oysters. Going down at low water, it was no hard task to

Oyster

collect as many oysters as the whole of the two companies could consume; nearly all parts of the coast of Florida furnish these excellent shell-fish in inexhaustible quantities."

Petals Plucked From Sunny Climes by Silvia Sunshine 1880

This book is an account of a northern tourist visiting the southeast.

"In consideration of the fine timber which surrounds Tampa, two mills are employed - one in sawing cedar, the other pine. The cedar here is of much finer quality than the upland, containing more oil."

"Fleas enter the list of perplexities, to draw rations from our perishable nature, run races, and practice acrobatic movements on our bodies, with astonishing facility. Roaches as long as your little finger look at us as if meditating a fierce attack, which, if executed, must result in our annihilation. Three small children lying close by are screaming alternately, from interrupted slumbers, caused by advances from the insect tribe."

"The eagle in her eyrie, with a nest built on the tallest pines, is reached with ropes, the young eaglets captured, to be cut in pieces, their wings measured from tip to tip, feathers counted, and bodies embalmed. Mr. and Mrs. Snake have no privileges."

"We are now landing at Egmont Key, which is an insular domain - a kingdom bounded by deep waters - a residence among turtles and birds of varied notes. This island is five miles in circumference, and seven from the mainland, commanding the entrance to Tampa Bay. Latitude - north 27° 36'; longitude - west from Greenwich, 82° 45'."

"No part of the world furnishes a greater variety of the finny tribe than this coast, and fisheries are being established in the vicinity. Sharks, sixteen or eighteen feet in length, make their appearance in company with devil-fish of enormous size. Jewfish, weighing three or four hundred pounds, together with tarpons of one hundred and fifty or two hundred pounds, are quite common. Schools of mullet swarm in these waters, constituting an article of commerce. Green and loggerhead turtle are taken, and form a lucrative traffic."

Fish variety

Rustling in the Rockies: Hunting and Fishing by mountain and stream.

by G. O. Shields, Belford, Clark and Co. Chicago 1883

This is an account of part of G. O. Shields travels around the U. S. Here he explores Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay.

"Our destination is Sarasota Bay, one hundred and fifty miles south of Cedar Key, and we have heard so much of the vast resources of that locality in the way of tropical fruits, rich tropical scenery, balmy atmosphere, and, above all, in fish and game, that our hearts bound with gratitude at the thought we are now on the homeward stretch toward it."

"At one o'clock A.M. we reached Egmont Light, which stands upon a small island called Egmont Key."

Egmont Key

"Egmont Key is a picturesque little isle half a mile wide and one and a half miles long. The government lighthouse and light-keeper's residence are handsome and substantial structures." We found Mr. Moore, the light-keeper, an intelligent, kind-hearted and hospitable gentleman. He gave us some interesting information concerning this island and others in the vicinity. He says there is a heron rockery on the island only half a mile from his house where the birds annually build their nests and rear their young. Last year there were five hundred nests there. He estimates that each nest produced on an average five birds, making the total crop two thousand five hundred. He considers them his pets, and will not allow them to be shot or disturbed in any way.

Mullett Key, two miles northeast, is the home of a large herd of deer, and Mr. Moore goes over there and kills one at any time when he wishes some fresh venison. Mr. Moore is an enthusiastic sportsman, by the way, and I am informed that he has killed one hundred and ninety-three deer in the past two years."

Tampa

"This (Tampa) is a pleasant little city of 1,800 inhabitants, situated at the head of Tampa Bay and mouth of the Hillsborough River."

"There are thousands of acres of wild lands lying adjacent to the coast".

"with princely residences, broad avenues and rich orange groves to the portion of each resident."

"woodsman, and it is interesting to contemplate what a vast city will in twenty years from today stretch away back from the beach of Tampa Bay, with ten to twenty acres in each lot."

"This point offers (Tampa) many attractions to sportsmen. Excellent fishing may be had in the mouth of the river and in the bay. Sea-trout, red snappers, mangrove snappers, and sheepshead are the varieties usually caught. Good duck and bay-bird shooting may be had near town, and by going fifteen to twenty miles into the country deer and turkeys may be found in liberal numbers."

schools
 "We enjoyed a pleasant sail down Tampa Bay on the morning of November 27th, on board the steamer "Valley City." The most interesting incident of the trip was the great schools of mullet we saw on the shoals off Snead's Islands, near the mouth of Manatee river. Without any exaggeration there were solid acres of them feeding on these shoals, and they were as close together as they could possibly swim. At some points they were in such shallow water that their back fins and the upper rays of their tails were out of the water. As they feed here, a seine three hundred feet long, skillfully handled, would catch, at a low estimate, ten to twenty barrels of fish at every haul, and they were not here in unusual numbers at this time, either. Captain Jackson informed me that it is no unusual thing to see twice or thrice the number at this point, that we saw on this trip. He says he frequently finds the water literally black with them, for a distance of two or three miles along this beach.

This story may sound decidedly "fishy", but every word of it can be corroborated by a dozen people who reside in the vicinity, and by any of the officers of the Tampa Steamship Company."

"The road runs through a belt of pine-woods, dotted thickly with ponds, covering from one to twenty acres each, the margins thickly grown with saw-grass, and in the center a pool of clear water. We came upon the first of these ponds, within half a mile of town, and saw in it a dozen or more of the large water birds which are so numerous in this state. I brought out my rifle and bagged a beautiful white ibis. A mile farther on we came to another pond. A large white egret sat near the center of it, about two hundred and fifty yards away. I drew a bead

on him, let go, and he immediately saw down. He was a beautiful specimen of the species, and measured five feet nine inches from tip to tip of wings, and four feet seven inches in height."

"Whenever we pass over shoals where the water is less than six or eight feet deep, we see myriads of beautiful fish of various kinds, among which are mangrove snappers, red-fish, sheepshead, mullet, drum-fish, grunTERS and many others.

Occasionally some of the great monsters of the deep show themselves to our eager eyes. A ray fish as large as the head of a hoghead, and weighing probably a hundred pounds, is aroused from its bed in the same by the near approach of our boat and swims rapidly away, dragging after it a tail resembling in form a whiplash."

"After passing these mangrove thickets we had plain sailing for awhile. Just below them we passed some long sand-bars, upon which were feeding great flocks of Spanish curlews, both straight bill and sickle bill, mullet, white-breasted plover and other varieties of bay birds .

A good wing shot could enjoy rare sport here, but I am in search of larger game and will not trouble these birds.

About three o'clock in the afternoon we came upon a series of oyster bars which extends clear across the bay (lower Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay) and nearly two miles up and down it. The tide had gone out by this time and we had some very hard work poling and occasionally wading, dragging and lifting our boat over the worst portions of the bars."

"I arose at day light the next morning and called Captain Landcaster on deck. He responded promptly and accepted my invitation to remain with me and spend a day or two fishing. We rigged our tackle and after a square breakfast hastily eaten, boarded the "Sky Lark," and sailed across the bay into Little Sarasota Pass, for our first day's fishing. As soon as we entered the Pass I attached an artificial minnow to my line and cast out for a troll. I had scarcely reeled out half of my two hundred and fifty feet of line, when whiz-z-z- it went across the pass and back to the other side in less time than it takes to tell it. Maurice luffed up and ran into shore. I was using light tackle, and finding that I had a game fish to deal with, I was compelled to play him a few minutes before attempting to land him. I soon wore him out sufficiently to be able to bring him aboard, when I found him to be a handsome specimen of the Cavalli, locally known as the jack-fish. He weighed four pounds, and was seventeen inches long. This fish closely resembles the pompano, both in outward appearance and flavor. He is one of the most delicious fish in the Gulf waters, is frequently served at hotels and restaurants in

the southern cities under the name of pompano, and none but an experienced palate can detect the difference. There is a streak of dark meat along either side of the backbone that is especially rich and oily, and somewhat resembles the flavor of the sardine, as we get it, dressed in oil.

After contemplating with pride, for a few minutes, this, my first prize, we pushed off and I cast again. We had gone but a few yards when the alarm in my reel notified me that I had some more business to attend to. I landed this catch with as little delay as possible, and was surprised and delighted to find that I had a fine Spanish mackerel sixteen inches long and weighing three pounds. This fish is too well known to need any description. Suffice it to say that I relished a piece of him broiled for breakfast next morning, as I had never before relished Spanish mackerel. We had scarcely gotten under way again, with perhaps one third of my line out, when away she went again. I thumbed the line, struck hard and although the drag was tight, my fish went down the Pass like a bolt of lightning, until every foot of my two hundred and fifty feet was out. I shuddered as I thought of the possibility of the line snapping, but at this juncture I gave him the butt of the rod, and succeeded in checking him. Then, what a thrilling sight met my eager eye! Whisp he went six feet into the air, and shook himself like a wild colt striving to break the lariat with which he is caught. But no, my mettley little friend, you are securely hooked. My line stands firm, and you must abide the consequences. He comes back into the water with a terrific splash, and starts directly toward me, and with all possible speed I reel in. He passes me, and by the time he comes taut above, I have a hundred feet or more of the line in hand. Then he jumps again, displaying his rich, silvery form in the bright sunlight, each time increasing my anxiety to make sure of my prize. As he starts down the Pass again with the speed of the wind, I thumb the reel again, but in spite of that and the drag, he takes it all out before he stops, and again rises high in the air. There is no sulking.

There, as with almost every other variety of game fish, it is all go, and that of the most vigorous quality. He ran constantly for thirty minutes, before he showed any signs of weakening, but finally was compelled from sheer exhaustion to give up the fight, when I landed him on shore. He proved to be what the natives call the "bony-fish," or "lady fish," and what the Bahama Islanders called the "ten pounder." It is by far the gamiest fish I have ever caught, and I have caught nearly every variety of fresh water fish on the continent. He has greater strength and greater speed than any fish of his size I ever saw. This one was eighteen inches long and weighed five and a half pounds.

We trolled through the entire length of the Pass, a distance of three miles, and caught fish as fast as we could handle them. At the mouth of the Pass we pulled up to a high bank, where the water was about six feet deep, and saw large schools of mangrove snapper (a fish resembling in shape our black bass) sporting along the bank, but we had no live minnows with us, and no other bait would tempt them, so we were compelled to pass them until another day.

We then pulled across to the opposite side of the Pass, where the surf was running, and fished an hour for redfish. For these we used cut bait (mullet is best) with heavy leads cast out as far as possible, and let the hook lay on the ground. We caught a number of very fine ones, weighing from four to six pounds, and about three o'clock pulled up and went home, well satisfied with our day's work. We had over a hundred pounds of fish, including, besides those mentioned above, drum, sheephead, grunTERS and seatrout.

I shall never forget this day's sport, no matter what other rich or varied sports I may enjoy in the future, so great was the variety of fish caught and so exciting the nature of the fishing.

For instance, I was trolling for sea-trout, but when I hooked a fish I never knew what it was until I got it up to the boat. The same state of affairs existed when fishing with cut bait for redfish."

Tampa Town: 1824-1886: The Cracker Town with a Latin Accent

Hurrican House Publishers, INc. Miami 1968

"Tampa Bay teemed with fish and turle. Reefs in the mouths of fresh water rivers were said to provide the finest oysters on the continent and sweet little "raccoon" oysters grew thickly on the roots of the mangroves along many shores. Cuban fishing camps dotted the shores with drying racks for fish to be sold in Havana. In 1828 a soldier stationed at the fort reported "the fishing is marvelous." Upon the return of the bi-weekly fishing fleet the catch was laid on the wharf. At the sound of the fish call the mess sergeants and their assistants appeared with handbarrows and carried off as much fish as they needed for their companies; Indians were allowed to help themselves. The remainder was buried to make compost for the officers' garden.

During the winter months schooners from Cuba and New England swarmed the bay for spanish mackerel, groupers and snappers. More than 500,000 fish per day were shipped on these vessels. In Tampa, stone crabs were sold for ten cents a dozen; salted mullet for one cent apiece. A visitor reported that "in the waters of Tampa Bay enormous quantities of fish and turtles may be found . . . the fish are so numerous that they impede the passage of boats." Newcomers who settled near the shore complained that they could not sleep at night because of the incessant splashing of the mullet on the flats. George Lizotte, an old-timer living near the mouth of the bay, told an anazing tale of witnessing the passage of "a school of fish which entered Tampa Bay in the morning, kept moving northward all day long and was still passing when darkness fell." On Tampa Bay, a fisherman's paradise, no one ever starbed."

"The woods in the nearby wilderness, later to become Ybor City, were full of deer, turkey, squirrel, raccoon, bear, quail and the razorback hog. Long after, an old-timer, reflecting on the past, said, "there was an abundance of seafood and wild life, and if people went hungry, it was because they were too lazy to hunt for something to eat."

Camping and Cruising in Florida by James A. Henshall, M.D. Cincinnati, Ohio. 1884 Robert A. Clark and Company, Publishers.

p. 213 "There were great quantities of horseshoe orking crabs in the shallow of this bayou".

"Here was plenty of fine oysters and fish".

The Florida Adventures of Kirkmunroe: Narrative and biographical

by Irving A. Leonard. The Mickler House Publishers. Chaluoeta, FL, 1975.

"Like the harbors of all ports on the Gulf of Mexico, that of Tampa, Florida, is so shallow and filled with reefs and bars that it is only navigated with the extremest difficulty, and the weary sea-tossed traveler en route to Tampa attaches an exaggerated importance to a place that can only be attained after so great labor."

To the sportsman Tampa Bay offers fish in numbers and variety exceeding his fondest hopes; but the woods and fields in the immediate vicinity of, and for several miles from, town are almost devoid of game. Deer, turkey, wild cats, alligators, ducks and quail can, however, be found in comparative abundance by going from ten to twenty miles in search of them; and from regular hunters both game and fish can always be obtained for the table.

River of the Golden Ibis by Gloria Jahoda. Holt, Rinehart and Min-
ston. New York 1973

"For the wildlife of the river and the bay the hotel spelled trouble. Professional guides on the staff took their clients up the Hillsborough at a fee of fifty dollars a day to hunt in its oak and hickory forests. The fee included food, rifles, bullets, hunting clothes, and transportation by wagon. During a single season guests of the Tampa Bay Hotel slaughtered five thousand and eighty-four quail and snipe, eleven deer, fourteen turkeys, and seven alligators."

Wildlife in Florida with a visit to Cuba by: Trench Townsend

Hurst and Blackett Publishers, London 1875.

southern counties of Florida are very thinly inhabited. Manatee, with an area of four thousand and seventy square miles, has a population of less than two thousand, and only three hundred and sixty acres of improved land; Monroe County has an area of about three thousand square miles, no cultivated land, and less than five hundred inhabitants, including Indians, but without including the island of Key West; Dade County has an area of four thousand four hundred square miles, a few acres of improved land near Biscayne Bay, and about a hundred and eighty inhabitants, of whom a hundred are Indians; Brevard County, north of Dade, and west of Manatee and Monroe, has an area of five thousand six hundred square miles, about twelve hundred inhabitants, no village, and no cultivated lands, with the exception of a few acres near the little settlement called St. Lucie on the Indian river.

"In all these counties the hammocks are still almost impenetrable jungles, the haunt of wild beasts, reptiles, insects, and innumerable birds, some of brilliant plumage and beautiful song, while the rivers and estuaries teem with fish which fall a far easier prey to the sportsman than do the large game."

"Sometimes we devoted our time to fishing for sea-trout, black-bass, and sheep's-head, fish which are tolerably abundant and took our hooks easily. For bait we used the soldier or fidler-crab, which we found in the mud and sand under the mangrove-bushes that fringed the river."

"The oysters in the bay are celebrated for their excellence, and are also exported, but little seems to be done in the way of turning the fish which abound in these waters to profitable account. Most of the settlers' houses are surrounded with orange groves."

Camp life in Florida: A Handbook for sportsmen and settlers. by
Charles Hallock. Forest and Stream Publishing Co., New York 1876

"A few miles up the Hillsborough River, fair trout fishing can be obtained, and about the docks and in the channel, passable sheepsheading will be found. By taking a row or sail boat, and proceeding to the oyster bar, nine miles down the bay, superior sheepshead and drum fishing can be enjoyed."

"Mullet Key, at the mouth of Tampa Bay, is a noted range for deer, and the still hunter will find it worth a visit. We were informed by a gentleman of the colored persuasion, who was in the habit of visiting the island, that rattlesnakes were plentiful and of a remarkable size; this statement we give as we received it, but would suggest to hunters the propriety of wearing leggings and looking out for "smakes in the grass" if they ever visit this island. Leaving Point Prunelles we steered a course for John's Pass, and landed on the island on the west side of the entrance, and in a few minutes captured a number of fine sheepshead. This locality is noted for its beautiful marine algae, and we deeply regretted the want of proper applicances to collect and preserve specimens. On the point of the island, at the north side of the entrance, we found a shallow lagoon containing fish, a matter of interest to sportsmen and tourists. An examination of the end of the island showed the existence of deer tracks in every direction."

"But to the biscuit business. I have reason to believe that my readers will conclude that the crew of the Spray had an attack of biscuits on the brain, but when it becomes necessary to keep the teeth going and the staff of life cannot be obtained, the biscuit business becomes an important subject. We purchased our barrel of "fresh and first-class pilot bread" from a firm whose names we shall not mention; for it is possible that the clerk may have made a mistake and delivered the wrong barrel. We opened the barrel, and the first thing that met our gaze were hundred of well-developed cockroaches. We carefully separated biscuits from

roaches, the bread being consigned to our bread box and the roaches to the briny deep. We made an attack upon the new biscuit, but discovered that eating them was a difficult undertaking; for each biscuit contained numerous slate-colored insects tasting like quinine. To eat such bread was impossible, so we were forced to fall back on sweet potatoes and fish until we could reach Clearwater Harbor."

These following articles began to show the depletion of the bay because of a heavier demand for food and growth in population in the local area.

Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission Vol. IX 1889

"Report upon an investigation of the fishing grounds off the West Coast of Florida". By A. C. Adams and N. C. Kendall, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 1891

"Visit to Tampa Bay and return to Key West".

"During March 28 the Grampus was under way bound to Tampa. In the morning many large schools of young herring were seen, pursued by about a dozen porpoises. One kingfish (*Scomberomorus*) was caught in the afternoon, and at night the schooner made Egmont light. She entered Tampa Bay the next day, and anchored off Gadsden's Point, about 5 miles below Port Tampa, where she was joined by Dr. Henshall.

April 3, the seine was hauled on Gadsden's Point and the following fish were obtained: Angel fish (*Chaetodon faber*), mullet (*Mugil curema*), including the young about an inch long, gar fish (*Tylosurus marinus*), sailors' choice (*Lagodon rhomboides*), half beaks (*Hemirhamphus unifasciatus*), cypruodonts, etc.

April 4, the Grampus returned to Egmont Key, where a large number of small herring and a few other fish were seined on the shore. In leaving Tampa Bay, two large devil fish (*Manta birostris*) and two flying fish were observed. The Tortugas were reached on the 7th and the schooner remained there until the 9th, during which time the seine was hauled several times on Garden Key and Bird Key. At the former place the following material was obtained: Barracudas (*Sphyrana picuda*), bone fish (*Albula vulpes*), cock-eyed pilot (*Glyphidodon saxatilis*), striped grunts (*Hammulon elegans*), and several species

of small fish belonging mostly to the Serranidae. The catch at Bird Key comprised a trunk fish (*Ostracion trigonum*), several small fish, crabs, annelids, ophiurans, sea urchins, shrimp, and specimens of octopus. Jelly fishes, tunicates, holothurians, and aplysia were taken in the moat."

Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission. "The Oyster-
 Bars of the West Coast of Florida: Their depletion and
 restoration. By: A Smeltz. Vol. XVII. 1897. Washington, D. C.
 U.S.G.P.O. 1898

"In 1876 I came to the west coast of Florida from one of the largest oyster growing sections in the world, Chesapeake Bay. I landed at Cedar Keys and at once became interested in the oyster beds of Florida. After spending three weeks at Cedar Keys, I cruised southward, examining the most prominent oyster beds, such as Crystal River Bay, the bars of the Cootie region, Clearwater Harbor, Point Pinellas, Hillsboro Bay, Old Tampa Bay, and on to a hamlet I found at the mouth of the Hillsboro River known as Tampa; thence I continued southward to the Alafia River, Big and Little Manatee, Sarasota, Boca Grande oyster bars and 100 miles farther south, and on every hand I found the same condition - oysters, oysters everywhere. How little did I then think that in less than twenty five years every one of these bars would be partially or totally depleted. On every hand I found these immense reefs and beds of oysters in such seemingly inexhaustible supplies that it frequently occurred to me that the great God of nature must have gone ahead of me and, with hands wide open, scattered right and left and out into the depths so far that I failed to find their limits. On the shores, as we landed from time to time I found for about 150 miles, at short intervals, great mounds of oyster shells, often 25 feet high and 200 feet long, monuments of a magnificent oyster supply antedating all records and traditions, feeding races so far back that ethnology shakes her head and declares, " I never knew them."

every case is: As long as any of the oyster growing States were in the hands of a few Indians the demand never approximated the natural supply, and even during the early occupation of the country by white men, with its sparsely settled communities, the demands were insignificant, and the oyster bars increased and multiplied;

but when the tide of immigration set in, and the sparsely settled communities became thriving villages, and mere hamlets became splendid cities, and in the place of the Indian's canoe and the early settler's bateau, came the sloops, schooners, steamers, railroads, and even the ocean steamers, demanding these oysters to distribute them to the east, west, north, and south, to say nothing of the increased home demand - when we consider all these constantly increasing demands, we see very readily that the answer to the question is simply that the demand is an hundredfold in excess of the natural supply, and the artificial supply amounts to nothing, and never will amount to anything, in Florida, as it never has amounted to anything in any other State, until by proper legislation oyster-raising is put on a business basis, the State giving every citizen who wishes to engage in the oyster business the same opportunities, the same rights, and the same protection she gives her citizens to conduct any other legitimate business.

As matters stand today in Florida, the oyster interests (I mean their protection and propagation) are everybody's interest, and on the west coast of Florida there are thousands of acres of land covered with water that are more valuable for food production than the best hummock lands, and yet neither the State nor its citizens get one farthing's benefit from them, whereas, by proper legislation, these oyster lands now lying idle could be sold or leased and put under the head of taxable property, and thus immensely increased the revenues of the State. Then, and not till then, will public opinion respect the property a man has in oyster beds.

The Fisheries and Fishery industries of the United States: Section II:

A Geographical Review of the Fisheries Industries and Fishing

Communities for the year of 1880. "Fisheries of Tampa Bay" U. S.

Government Printing Office. Washington, D. C. 1887 (By Silar Sterms)

"Fisheries of Tampa Bay - The shores of Tampa Bay differ but little from those of the bays lying to the south. The waters are deeper and broader, and therefore the shores more generally terminate in sandy beaches and little bluffs; where the waves and currents have acted with unusual force. There are some points where the features of the coast off Monroe County are reproduced, the shoals extending a considerable distance into the bay, the shores being cut up into small, low, mangrove islands, separated by shoal channels of water. The land is everywhere covered with a dense growth, in the dry places, of pines, oaks, palmettos, and other trees peculiar to the climate and in the wet places, of mangroves, for the most part. About the lower part of the bay, and touching the Gulf, are several quite large sand islands. These are flat and bear a growth of palmetto and pine trees and coarse grass. On the shores of Tampa are more people than on any other part yet mentioned. Tampa, at the head of the bay, is a thriving town, and the northeastern and southwestern ends are quite thickly settled. Only two individuals were found who caught more fish than were necessary for their own food. These were Mr. Deshong, who lives at the head of Tampa Bay, and Mr. O. S. Jones, living at Catfish Point.

Mullet fishing at Tampa Bay - Mr. Deshong has been living on the bay for thirteen years, and has fished every season for mullet. He uses a small seine and gill nets. In 1874 he salted 150 barrels of mullet. Fish were then very plentiful, and here was a good demand for them. In 1876, he put up 130 barrels that year fish were not so abundant. In 1877 he packed 50 barrels, fish were scarce that year. In 1878 he also put up 50 barrels; during that year fish were a little more plentiful than in the previous years. In

1879 he only packed 25 barrels; fish were very scarce and the demand was limited. He put up his fish in cypress wood barrels and half barrels, and sold them to the inland settlers, either direct or through the Tampa storekeepers, at the rate of \$7.00 a barrel.

Mr. Deshong estimates that 100 barrels of fish are annually salted about Tampa Bay. Mr. Jones's opinion is that this estimate is twice too large. In speaking of the increase or decrease in the abundance of fish in Tampa Bay, Mr. Deshong says that several species, daily under his notice, have been decreasing in numbers steadily for the last five or six years. The mullet comes under this head. He thinks that the amount of spawn wasted with the mullet that are caught influence this decrease, and that the fish are frightened off by those fishing for them. Like many other fishermen on this coast, he is confident that many kinds of fish have lately been less abundant. Under that head comes also the white perch (*Roccus americanus*)."

"Porpoises are often struck, and, although very powerful and tenacious of life, are easily handled and brought within reach of the lance. Mr. Deshong has caught 25 or 30, large and small, in a day, but 8 or 10 is an average day's catch. A medium sized shark will yield 2 or 2 1/2 gallons of oil from the liver and fat stomach coating; very large ones have been known to yield 10 gallons from the liver alone. Their bodies are not used, except to bait up other with. Mr. Deshong says that their flesh is watery, and, when allowed to dry, leaves but little bulk."

"Many old fishermen have stated that mullet would not enter such an arrangement, but will, when they strike the leader, turn away. It is thought that if Mr. Jones was in a position to experiment in deeper water the results would be very satisfactory. Mr. Jones does not attempt to barrel any fish, but sells them kench-salted to any who come for them. He sells annually from 2,000 to 3,000 fish, for each of which he receives about 3 cents. He also thinks, with Mr. Deshong, that many fish, and among them mullet, are yearly decreasing in numbers. He makes particular mention of the white perch, saying that they will not take the hook in Tampa Bay."

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Attached is a PDF of a collection of Historical Accounts of Natural Conditions in Tampa Bay. This was compiled circa 1980 by Michael Heerschap, a former EPC employee as part of his graduate work at USF.

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