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“Letter From Okeechobee” 1880s Editorial Of Gabriel Cunning To Bartow *Informant* and Tampa *Sunland Tribune*

Michael Reneer and Dr. James M. Denham

“**I** think justice demands that Okeechobee should be heard,” wrote Gabriel Cunning on June 30, 1881. So began Cunning’s brief but interesting career as correspondent to the Bartow *Informant* and Tampa *Sunland Tribune*. Gabriel Cunning’s given name is unknown; his home and real identity is likewise unknowable. And yet, letters from a man calling himself Gabriel Cunning and claiming a home in “Okeechobee County”¹ appeared in the Bartow *Informant* from June to December 1881. Cunning also penned three missives to the Tampa *Sunland Tribune* in 1878 and 1881. His humorous and informative letters reprinted here shed light on the social, economic, and political times of the lower Florida frontier in the 1880s.

The first issue of the Bartow *Informant* appeared only two weeks before the first installment from Gabriel Cunning. The proprietor of this new journalistic enterprise was D.W.D. Bouilly, who emigrated to Bartow after a failed attempt in the newspaper business in Blountsville, Alabama. It was common practice for small-town nineteenth century newspapers such as Bouilly’s *Informant* to make use of guest “informants” or “correspondents” to provide readers with information on places and events from nearby locales. Such articles spurred community interest and were eagerly sought after by the general reading public. In addition to Cunning’s “Letter from Okeechobee” column, Bouilly’s paper included letters and articles from Manatee County, Charlotte Harbor, Hernando County, Ft. Meade, and Tampa. While some

of Bouilly’s informants wrote irregularly, Gabriel Cunning’s “Letter from Okeechobee” became a mainstay in the first six months of the paper’s existence.

As the county seat of Polk County, Florida, Bartow offered many prospects to Bouilly and other migrants seeking a new start in the post Civil War era. In 1880, Polk’s population stood at slightly more than 3,100 inhabitants. Even so, this total was poised to advance rapidly. At the time Cunning addressed readers of the Bartow *Informant*, cattle and subsistence farming was the chief economic pursuit of pioneers in the Lower Peninsula. Indeed, the cattle industry was the true key to riches for the pioneers of South Florida. Before the Civil War, the cattle trade with Cuba was substantial, but after the war it brought considerable wealth to the region. At the end of the Civil War, the focus of trade shifted from supplying Confederate and Union forces to supplying Cuba. In the decade after the war, pioneers shipped almost 200,000 head of cattle from Florida to Cuba.² In 1878, for example, the Tampa *Sunland Tribune* reported that cattlemen shipped 8,012 head of cattle worth \$112,168.00 from the Tampa Bay ports of Tampa and Manatee.³ While cattle shipments from Tampa Bay were substantial during these years, it is unlikely that they ever equaled the numbers shipped from Punta Rassa, in Charlotte Harbor, Florida’s oldest shipping point. In 1879, F.A. Hendry, of Fort Myers, estimated that in the five previous years an average of 10,000 head of cattle, at a price of \$14 per head, were shipped each year from Punta Rassa.⁴

Citrus and vegetable growing also attracted migrants. Nearly every edition of news-

papers published in Tampa, Orlando, Bartow and other South Florida towns contained articles for perspective migrants extolling the various advantages of certain crops and the availability of land. By way of example, on September 4, 1879, the Tampa *Sunland Tribune*, in an article titled "Culture and Shipment of Vegetables," lauded the ease and profitability with which garden peas, cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, and squashes could be grown in South Florida.

But if Cunning and his neighbors in the southern peninsula were to truly prosper, they needed communication and transportation links to the isolated region. They yearned for iron rails to reach their isolated communities. Cunning's dispatches speak to these aspirations. In 1867, telegraph messages could be received at Punta Rassa and, in 1884, the first trains chugged into Tampa. By that time thousands of migrants were heading to the region to invest in citrus groves. Phosphate strikes in the late 1880s attracted hundreds of others.⁵ Cunning also writes of Hamilton Disston's purchase of four million acres of land from the state of Florida for \$.25 per acre. Disston's dream was to use the latest technology to drain the overflowed lands. Through this scheme thousands of acres of land could be sold at cheap prices to migrants who could grow citrus and a multitude of other tropical crops. Cunning speaks to this scheme plus speculates on the nefarious political machinations that made it possible.

In 1880, only three counties and only a few settlements graced the southern part of the peninsula south of Polk County: Manatee (pop. 3,500), Dade (pop. 257) and Monroe County (pop. 11,800).⁶ Miami (which would become the region's only real city) contained just a few dozen people in 1880. Because the vast majority of Monroe County's population resided in the island village of Key West, no more than 5,000 souls would have lived in the southern peninsula south of Bartow. This total included approximately 200 Seminoles living in five villages.⁷ Only a few cattle trails and primitive roads, cut primarily by the army's corps of engineers during the Seminole Wars, linked distant frontier outposts such as Pine Level (Manatee County Seat), the village of Manatee (now Bradenton),⁸ Fort Green, Fort Ogden,⁹ Fort Myers, and Fort Bassinger,¹⁰ on the west bank of the

Kissisimee River. Below Fort Bassinger, and located near the western shore of Lake Okeechobee, was the village that grew around abandoned Fort Center. It is likely that Cunning addressed his readers from one of these two settlements. Just to the south of these two settlements lay the Caloosahatchee River. South Florida's earliest settlers speculated on the feasibility of connecting the river to the lake, but by 1879, these high hopes were about to be realized. In the spring of that year, a Tampa newspaper reported that J.L. Meigs, a U.S. Surveyor, had arrived in Fort Myers "on his way to the headwaters of the Caloosahatchee to give the river a thorough survey, and to make a report upon the feasibility, of opening the Okeechobee into the river." F.A. Hendry of Fort Myers, and a number of his associates, were conducting an independent survey of their own.¹¹

While this trackless region was home to the Seminole, cattlemen, panthers, and only a few hardy homesteaders, local citizens were optimistic about the fertility of the soil and the desirability and prospects of outside immigration. One newcomer boasted that "Okeechobee is one of the finest lakes in Florida with only 2 islands in it with fine hammock and prairie land nearly all around it suitable for cane, corn, rice or vegetables also for fruits, oranges, guavas, bananas, pine apples &c. The Indians have fields and raise fine corn, potatoes, pumpkins, and bananas, which all grow finely and with little cultivation. Lovers of picturesque scenery should made a trip through, when the canal is completed, plenty of game of nearly all kinds, and fish in abundance."¹²

Cunning addressed readers of the *Informant* and the *Sunland Tribune* at the time when White Conservatives had retaken control of state government. Florida had overthrown Radical Republican rule four years earlier. Florida's Bourbon governors, George Drew and William D. Bloxham, brought their economic policies to a public eager for better times. It was a policy of low taxes, slashed state expenditures, and land giveaway schemes calculated to lure Northern investment capital to the state to develop the state's resources and lure migrants to Florida's open spaces. By 1880, in Florida, as in the rest of the South, the Republican Party (now discredited among white Southerners as the party of Carpetbaggers, Scalawags, and African-Americans),

became a marginalized victim of the solid Democratic South. Cunning's letters are reflective of white conservative public opinion of the time. Readers of the *Informant* and *Sunland Tribune* would have reveled in his stories. Both were Conservative Democratic papers in a state increasingly taken over by Bourbonism.¹³

Cunning addressed the readers of the *Informant* and the *Sunland Tribune* in the manner and style of the southern humorists of the ante- and post-bellum periods. Such writers as Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris no doubt served as a model for Cunning and other writers of the time.¹⁴ Cunning's purpose was to make his readers laugh, but also to have them absorb the hidden meaning of his stories. Because he shared the social and cultural attitudes that were typical of rural southern whites, Cunning used words and phrases (including racial and ethnic epithets) that may offend some readers, which the editors deeply regret. Still, these statements and references accurately convey racial attitudes and assumptions of the author's time and place.

On June 30, 1881, D.W.D. Bouly proudly proclaimed to readers of the *Bartow Informant* that he was introducing "Gabriel Cunning," who furnished a series of articles to the *Tampa Tribune*, a year or two ago,¹⁵ and who made some reputation as a writer, has agreed to write regularly for the *Informant*, and his first article appears this week."

"Letter from Okeechobee"

Bartow *Informant*, June 30, 1881

Gabriel Cunning

Ed. *Informant*

As all the counties of Florida are being ground through the press and tossed before the public in the newspapers of the day, I think justice demands that Okeechobee should be heard from in the great immigration furore.

Okeechobee county presents inducements to emigration far superior to any county in Florida, or to any other state or territory on the continent. One of its great advantages is, that it has room enough for all who may come, possessing all that vast expanse of country extending from the Atlantic ocean on the east, to the empire of Manatee on the west; bounded by the sand mountains, or backbone of Florida, on the north, and running south to infinity;

including the great lake which bears its name, with the Everglades and Big Cypress – presenting to the bustling world a county in which the tide of immigration will have room to spread out and develop, and not be always driving the inhabitants to Polk and Manatee, to make room for others, as is the case with many counties now. For health Okeechobee stands superb – she has not a graveyard in her territory. This fact alone should be enough; but we are

For health Okeechobee stands superb – she has no graveyard in her territory. This fact alone should be enough; but we are happy to add, that all the mounds and remains of the mound builders here, not a human sketeton appears – proving that race of people, who seemed to be "heavy on the die," from the way they piled their bones over the continent, were never able to die at Okeechobee.

Gabriel Cunning

happy to add, that in all the mounds and remains of the mound builders here,¹⁷ not a human skeleton appears – proving that race of people, who seemed to be "heavy on the die," from the way they piled their bones over the continent, were never able to die at Okeechobee. And of late a great number of Northern invalids, in the last stage of life, with a morbid love of distinction, have come to Okeechobee in order to immortalize themselves by pioneering a graveyard, but soon after their project invariably "busted" by their regaining their health, and having to go to work, or leave the county to evade the vagrant laws.

But another item which gives us the ascendancy is this. While each of the other counties boasts of being "home of the orange," Okeechobee is the home of the alligator. On him we look as the hope of he country. His utility in the wealth and commerce in our country is asset in its infancy. His future, however, is full of promise

– he smells of money. Already his very teeth are taking the place of diamonds and precious metals in the jewelry of the landholders of America and the nobility of Europe. J[ay] Gould wears them for shirt studs, and while in Florida loads his pants' pockets full to present to [Pres. U.S.] Grant and [Pres. James A.] Garfield. Also I am told that [Otto von] Bismarck never issues a diplomatic order unless bedecked in alligator jewelry. And it is reported down in the everglades that the bankers of Wall street are hoarding this precious ivory, fearing that the greenbackers will bring gold and silver into dispute, and 'gators' teeth become the currency of the country. Aside from the value of the teeth, the skins of the 'gators are becoming the desire of the old world. The gentry of France, and lords and commons of England, never trust themselves now-a-days to public gaze without standing knee deep in alligator boots; and I am credibly informed that several prime ministers of foreign powers are now corresponding with Philip Dzialynski,¹⁸ of Fort Meade, and certain parties at Orlando trying to engage alligator skins to carpet the royal palaces of their respective kingdoms and bottom the chairs of their parliament chambers. But it is for the enterprising citizens of Okeechobee to discover the practical utility of the 'gator. Dr. Pluck our most worthy county judge and hotel-keeper, has for a long time been regaling his New England visitors with codfish balls made from dried alligator; and his wife Mrs. Annalizer Pluck, has succeeded in making the best Bologna sausage from the same article, which many of the surveyors and explorers pronounced excellent; being free from the canine and feline odor so common to those in city markets. Also Capt. Purdy, our leading merchant has applied for a patent for making canned salmon out of alligator tails; and Rev. Napoleon B. Young, our minister (son of the late Brigham Young) has canned up quite a cargo of silver sides in alligator oil and expects to sell them in the North for French sardines. May success crown his effort.

“Letter from Okeechobee – No. 2”
 Bartow *Informant*, July 7, 1881
 Gabriel Cunning
 Ed. *Informant*

Since writing my last, the highest excitement has prevailed. Having been informed that the governor [William D.

Bloxham]¹⁹ had sold Okeechobee County to a German and French company, and not liking the idea of coming under the rule of a foreign power, and losing our offices, we repudiated it by holding an indignation meeting. But after learning that the sale was made to a Mr. Disston,²⁰ of Philadelphia, public feeling became more composed, and since telegraphing to the governor, and being informed by him that he would still control the offices and that there would be no changes made, public confidence has been completely restored. However, we learn that Mr. Disston still designs to settle German and French colonists in our county. This is a lucky hit on his part, and will greatly develop our resources; for we have frogs enough in the everglades to feed the French republic for the next century, and palmetto cabbage sufficient to fatten a million of Dutch. Then everglade frogs, both pickled and canned, will command the highest price in the markets of France, while palmetto cabbage chopped into sour kraut will be sold in the Berlin markets under the name and style of Okeechobee salad. Truly our resources are as innumerable as they are inexhaustible.²¹

But the great and paramount inducement Okeechobee offers to the emigrating world is the grand fact that every man here holds an office. Our white population being small and our territory large, we have so arranged our offices and districted our territory that every voter can hold an office. How much better this is than in Brevard county, where they have only half enough offices for the people, and that puts half the inhabitation out of office half the time. In Polk and Manatee it is still worse. There, I am told two thirds of the people are out of office two thirds of their time. How their families must suffer. What is freedom without office? What is an orange grove, a free store front, a coach-and-four, bank stock, governments bonds and such like without office? What is a republic without offices enough to supply each of its constituents? That is the reason, doubtless, why all former republics have failed, and the founders of our government made the same mistake by not providing each subject with an office. Who wants to spend a useful life moping up and down the thoroughfares of the world mixing with the commonality without as much as a title to his position, or a handle to his name?

Therefore we say to all, both far and near, both rich and poor, come one, come all, who have any disposition to serve their country, to be virtuous and be happy, to aspire and be honorable, here you can satiate your patriotic motives by holding office the balance of your day.

This inducement has proved a happy life. Most of the members of the last legislature, despairing of reelection, on account of the squatter tax law,²² are preparing to come to Okeechobee. And we are in constant receipt of letters from Polk, Manatee, and Orange counties, as well as from Tampa, Gainesville, Tallahassee, and Washington, from disappointed patriots, who are still determined to serve their country or "bust," and are rushing to Okeechobee to retrieve lost fame.

"Letter from
Okeechobee"
Bartow *Informant*,
July 14, 1881
Gabriel Cuning
Ed. *Informant*

Since I have commenced writing for your paper, I am in constant receipt of letters from abroad, making various enquiries, which, by your permission, I shall answer through your columns.

Absalom Jones, of Utah territory, wishes to come to Okeechobee for his health, and bring his family; but being a Mormon, and having three wives, he desires to know if the laws of Florida are lenient on polygamy, and if not, which wife had he better bring – the first, the last, or the middle one.

Absalom, the question has puzzled me much, having no law at Okeechobee but about half of *Bush's Digest*²³ and Andrew Johnson's impeachment. I could find nothing in them satisfactory. I then inquired of all the prominent lawyers in the circuit, and wrote to the governor and attorney general of the state [George P. Raney];²⁴ but they seemed reticent, and did not like to commit themselves upon so grave a question. Determined to have the subject sifted, I addressed a letter to attorney general Dovens

[Charles Devens],²⁵ at Washington, and he, after consulting with various members of the cabinet, wrote me a very unsatisfactory answer, declining to make any decision officially, but gave his private opinion that the middle wife was your best holt.

But since our legislature has passed a law to tax United States property, we have concluded Okeechobee county court has an equal right to make a law in favor of polygamy, which law will be entered on record at the next meeting of the court for

the benefit of Mormon visitors. So now bring your entire family.

Solomon Jackson, Lake City, Fla, writes to know what would be the chance to start a school at Okeechobee.

If it is a nigger school you want, there is no show; and if it is a white school, the prospects are not flattering. Dr. Pluck's wife, Mrs. Annalizer Pluck, taught our first school under a wild grape arbor on the lake shore,

but a sudden rise of the lake bursted her school. Since that we had a school taught by a minister in good standing, but he became so indolent and inattentive as to let the alligators catch most of the small children, which so depleted the number of scholar age in the place, that I doubt whether a man teacher could get a paying school. But I believe a woman teacher might get a school – our people are favorable to women teachers. In most instances, they teach as well, and sometimes better, than a man, and being "nothing but woman," you know, we get them for half price.

"Letter from Okeechobee"
Bartow *Informant*, July 21, 1881
& Tampa *Sunland Tribune*,
August 6, 1881.
Gabriel Cuning
Ed. *Informant*

I am in receipt of a letter containing an important question on a grave subject. I give the letter in full:

However, we learn that Mr. Disston still designs to settle German and French colonists in our county. This is a lucky hit on his part, and will greatly develop our resources; for we have frogs enough in the everglades to feed the French republic for the next century, and palmetto cabbage sufficient to fatten a million Dutch.

Gabriel Cuning

Skye High P.O., Hillsboro Co., Fla
Gabriel Cunning

Had the last legislature the constitutional right to tax improvements on government land? If you claim they had, arise and explain.

Your's respectfully
Ichabod Tickelsly.

In reply to your question, Ichabod, you are aware that your name has had a long reputation for being written on the wrong side. But to business, I shall answer you at arm's-length.

The legislature most emphatically had the right to pass the squatter tax law. You are a pretty advocate of state rights, and doubt so plain a proposition. I can prove the legislature's right by seven inexorable and unanswerable arguments:

1. The constitution of the United States clearly defines what a state cannot do, but in no instance says it shall not tax the general government; and the Scripture says, "Where there is no law there is no transgression."²⁶

2. The general government is a sovereign power, and the state of Florida is a sovereign power. Now, has not the general government the right to tax Florida. Certainly it has. Then, reversing the rule, that works both ways; Florida has the right to tax the general government.

3. Florida is a sovereign state, and if it has not the right to tax anything it pleases, it is not sovereign in its prerogatives.

4. The general government is a foreign corporation, doing business in the state of Florida, and has not the state the right to tax foreign corporations?

5. The general government being created by states, and not states by the government; makes the states supreme.

6. The land of the government was virtually given away to the people under the homestead act, and every settler has a defeasible ownership in the land he occupies; therefore what ownership he has should be taxed.

7. Florida is soon to be cut loose from the continent by a ship canal, and assume its position as a foreign power, and all we can get out of Uncle Sam, the better, before we are cut loose.

I could give a thousand more good reasons, but seven are enough. Not that I wish to cast reflections on the legislature by any analogy of the number to the seven sleepers, the seven plagues, or seven devils,²⁷ No, not all. Those great men only took an advanced step in state rights, and as soon as

the people can get the scales knocked from their eyes, they will rally and sustain these noble men in that noble act.

All we need is a little more light, and we will pass laws to tax all the lands, forts, arsenals, armories, hospitals, post-offices, land offices, custom-houses and ports of entry belonging to the general government within the limits of our state, and also compel all postmasters, custom-house officers, land officers, general surveyors, civil engineers, military and naval officers, to take out occupation license, and impose a heavy poll tax on all soldiers, sailors and marines stationed in the state.

The fact is, we must tax. I repeat it, we must tax. Our agricultural college must be guarded, or the lizards would devour it; our state officers must be supported at high salaries, in order to ensure first class talent (the kind we have had for the last fifteen years); our canal system must go on; our railroads must be built; we must perpetuate our bureau of emigration. Therefore we must tax!

"Letter from Okeechobee"
Bartow Informant, July 28, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. Informant

Our county court met on last Saturday, pursuant to adjournment. Judge Pluck,

"The Scriptures say 'wise men will change, but fools never change.' Now worthy members, I, for one, am on the change. Fasting and prayer may cast out devils, but fasting will never get a county out of debt. And, I tell you, in words with the bark on, that this day I am going to eat three hearty meals, drink some pure whisky, buy me a suit of store clothes, and some shoes and socks for my wife and children, or I will resign before the sun goes down.

Dr. Zebedee Pluck, county judge, hotelkeeper and president of the county immigration society

the worthy chairman, introduced the object of the meeting by a short speech, as follows:

“Worthy Citizens and Faithful Servants of the Public Good

“Again have we met to deliberate on the interests of our country, and, if possible, devise some means to get Okeechobee out of debt. That has been our end and aim – the burden of our energies and effort from the date of our commissions until now. Every exigency, every emergency, every economy that we could devise has been brought to bear, and all up to date has proved a failing.

“First we knocked off our mileage, and it did no good; then we relinquished our fees, and that failed. We then sold our store clothes and patched up our old duds, but still the county remained in debt. As a last resort we entered an order on the minutes that we would do without our dinners, go to bed supperless, chew long green tobacco, eat our hominy without gravy, our clabber without syrup, drink watered whisky, and make our wives and children go barefooted.

“For months have we lived up to this rigid experiment, only to meet this morning to record in failure. Okeechobee is still in debt. Here we are, met together this morning, dry and hungry, ragged, discouraged, depressed in spirits and have lost so much flesh – at least forty per cent. Avoirdupois weight – that we look like a committee of skeletons, that had come up from the graveyard to light our pipes and go back again.

“The Scriptures say ‘wise men will change, but fools never change.’ Now worthy members, I, for one, am on the change. Fasting and prayer may cast out devils, but fasting will never get a county out of debt. And I tell you, in words with the bark on, that this day I am going to eat three hearty meals, drink some pure whisky, buy me a suit of store clothes, and some shoes and socks for my wife and children, or I will resign before the sun goes down. I tell you, we have got to the end of the track, and must reverse the engine. We must change our tactics. I can stand it no longer. Who is going to thank us for all this privation, suffering, sacrifice and starvation? And when we are dead, and buried up yonder in that scrub, who is going to point to our cypress headboard and say, ‘There, lie the five illustrious martyrs, that starved Okeechobee county out of debt.’

“Now, gentlemen, business is business, and it takes poison to kill poison, and the hair

of the dog is good for the bite; and I propose we try going in debt to get out of debt. It is the last resort; the only remedy. I propose this, that we issue new scrip, and take up our old scrip; then issue scrip to pay off all outstanding claims, then issue \$10,000 in small bills, from 5c to \$5, and make it a legal tender by order of court. Soon it will become a circulating medium and we can loan out the \$10,000, and in two years the interest on the same will pay our county debt. Then call in the \$10,000 in scrip; and won’t we be out of debt? Most assuredly we will. Don’t you see the point gentlemen?”

At this the speaker was interrupted by all the board clapping their hands and exclaiming: “We see it! we see it!”

Judge Pluck desired to go on the hungry board, but it would not suffer him. His measure was then put to vote, and passed without dissent or debate.

The clerk, Maj. Plute, was ordered to provide a quire of paper, and proceed to issue. Soon each member had his hands full of small scrips, paying themselves back dues. Sheriff McKillop was dispatched up to Cap. Purdy’s store with some scrip to lay in refreshments, but soon returned with the sad news that the Captain refused to take the scrip.

This was a slam to our hopes, but Judge Pluck was equal to the emergency. He had an order entered of record, making it contempt of court to refuse our scrip.

The sheriff returned with a copy of the order, and was told to bring the supplies, or bring the Captain. The supplies came; and soon the board was feasting on the emoluments of office.

After they had finished their repast, they adjourned till after dinner, in order to lay in store clothes and shoes and socks for their families.

P.S. – Our people are well pleased with the Disston land sale, since they have learned it only includes the stumps that [Gov. George F.] Drew²⁸ sold the timber from. A million dollars for stumps is bully!

“Letter from Okeechobee”

Bartow *Informant*, August 4, 1881

Gabriel Cunning

Ed. *Informant*

Last week I left our county court adjourned, on the hunt for store clothes.

But during their adjournment they indulged in some pure whisky, which being a little too good, they didn't assemble till next morning, when they put in an early appearance, uniformed in black calico suits, creaking brogans, standing collars, and "shoo-flies" – the most dignified-looking body of men I ever beheld, except the last general assembly.

The former minutes being read and adopted, the chairman announced the board ready for business.

Sheriff McKillop presented a claim for guarding a prisoner three months, during the last rainy season, while the jail was overflowed.

One member objected to the claim on the ground that said prisoner was his own son, and, to his own personal knowledge, the said prisoner chopped five acres of hammock and furnished all the palmetto cabbage and catfish the sheriff's family lived on during said imprisonment.

This was leading to a warm discussion, when the sheriff very wisely withdrew his claim for the present, but that day took the dissenting member home with him to dinner.

After dinner he again presented his claim, somewhat amended and considerably enlarged, and it passed without a dissenting voice.

Rev. Napoleon B. Young, our county superintendent, then presented an old account for taking the enumeration of the school children of the county last year. But a Hard-shell member of the board said he would oppose it on the ground that the reverend gentleman preached all the time he was engaged in said service, and it would look too much like making the county pay for preaching, to allow the claim – not that he cared for the scrip, but the principle was his point.

But Judge Pluck – who is well versed in state matters; having been engaged in a keno bank in Tallahassee, for a number of years; which business made him quite intimate with the state officers and members of the legislature – decided in favor of the claim, because many of the state officers traveled ostensibly on official business, when their real point was to make stump speeches and pack conventions to secure the next governorship. Yet they always received pay, therefore the claim should be allowed.

Judge Pluck then presented a pauper medical bill for doctoring a sick Seminole.

One impertinent member asked the clerk if the doctor had his diploma on file as the law requires.

Judge Pluck soon silenced his chops by a fine for contempt of court.

Another member declared the Seminoles were not citizens, and therefore not entitled to pauper rights.

Judge Pluck said he knew a prominent Radical to be admitted to the general assembly on the Seminole vote.

Another member said, as long as the Seminoles rejected Christianity and accused white men of stealing hogs, he should oppose them to the hilt.

The last member asked the Judge if he cured the Indian. The Judge said he did. "Well," said the member, "I shall not allow it neither. If you had killed him, I should have favored your claim."

The Judge became vexed and vicious, and swore he would enlarge it fourfold, and have the legislature to pass it as a relief bill, as many bills of less merit had passed that body.

Capt. Purdy then presented his account for acting as registering officer at last election.

Judge Pluck, still mad over his own claim, declared there was no law in Bush's digest for paying registering officers. The entire board agreed with him.

The Captain became enraged, but was firm; and, looking the board square in the face, he declared he would go to jail and lie there till the ants carried him out through the grates, before he would ever take another dollar of Okeechobee scrip for any purpose; and stamping the muck off his brogans, he left the room.

The board turned pale and caved in. The public credit was at stake. They allowed his claim in an instant.

Squire McClintock presented a bill for acting as coroner in holding an inquest. But the Squire's divorced wife was at that time cooking at Judge Pluck's hotel, and had put him on the alert. The Judge swore the Squire to answer questions. The first question propounded was:

"Where did you get that coat, hat, breeches, boots, and hickory shirt you have on?"

The Squire turned deadly pale, began to stammer and evade, when the Judge, becoming excited, said:

"You dirty, thieving scoundrel! You stripped them off the dead man – that's how you got em!"

And he immediately ordered sheriff

McKillop to take him out in the scrub, strip the stolen duds off, and send him home ten miles, stark naked, through the saw-grass, with orders for him and his hog thieving jury to bring up the pocket-knife, brass watch and \$10 in change they stole at the inquest, under penalty of being put where the dogs won't bite 'em."

I understand the Squire has sold out and got a position in the United States secret service.

The clerk, Maj. Plute, now reported all the paper used up, and all the fly-leaves of the digest absorbed in writing warrants; whereupon the court ordered the sheriff to dispatch a nigger to Orlando with a pair of saddlebags full of alligator's teeth, and a pillow-slip full of bird plumes, and lay in stationery enough to bring Okeechobee out of debt.

They then adjourned.

Bartow Informant,
August 11, 1881
D.W.D. Bouilly

We have on file for next week's issue a long and laughable communication from "Gabriel Cuning." These articles alone are worth the subscription price of the *Informant*.

"Letter from
Okeechobee"
Bartow Informant,
August 11, 1881
Gabriel Cuning
Ed. Informant

I write under excitement, and of course shall not be very concise.

The real estate boom has played the wild with Okeechobee.

Last week the celebrated Irish soap receipt man put in an appearance, looking out a location. Property prices soon became shaky, and gradually commenced rising.

Dr. Pluck, who had offered his hotel a few days before for \$200, payable in gator skins, was now offered \$500 by the soap man, and refused to sell.

Capt. Purdy had two corner lots bargained to sheriff McKillop for \$100 in Okeechobee scrip on credit, but now

became frightened, and refused \$600, and is still raising.

But in a few days the boom would have gradually went down, and public confidence been restored, had it not been that just as things were beginning to calm down the "Lone Pilgrim," who sells a patent medicine by that name, put in his appearance also. Then everything was confusion and alarm. Corner lots went up kiting. Judge Pluck was offered \$15,000 for his sanitarium and shook his head. Capt. Purdy would not take \$10,000 for his lots, and refused to sell at any price. Sheriff McKillop, who had repeatedly offered his saw palmetto residence on the edge of the lake near the boulevards, for two cows and calves, now rose \$500 every day, till this morning he was offered \$5,000, and refused to sell at any price.

Rev. Napoleon B. Young, who had given a mortgage on Bird-roost island to secure the payment of a board bill to Maj. Plute, borrowed scrip and redeemed the same, and was yesterday offered \$20,000, and asks \$50,000.

Just as real estate was toppling at its highest notches, we received two valuable additions to our place in the persons of Prof. De Lacey and wife. Although the Professor has considerable capital, yet he refuses to buy property at

present prices; but wishing to establish a permanent theatre, he leased forty acres on the corner of the square from Judge Pluck, and at present is boarding at Judge Pluck's hotel, and mowing saw-grass to cover his opera house, where, about the 1st of October, he will open up with a small galaxy of stage stars for the ensuing winter. He expects to add great variety to his theatre by the addition of some Seminole stars that he has commenced training.

Such have been the sudden changes in Okeechobee in the last fortnight. All is speculation, hurry, bustle and excitement. There is not a saw-grass or muck pond for forty acres, in five miles of town, to be obtained for love or money. The people are

*P.S. – Judge Pluck, who is a
faith doctor, claims the honor
of curing [Pres. James]
Garfield. No sooner than he
heard the sad news, he hastened
to bury a black cat under his
door step, nailed a horse shoe
to the head of his bed, killed a
garter-snake with a broom
handle, stretched its head out
toward the North Star, and said
if the tail wiggled at sundown
Garfield would recover.
The tail wiggled.*

Gabriel Cuning

alarmed, affrighted and uneasy! Judge Pluck says that if personal property should take a sudden raise, the county court would have to issue some more scrip in order to keep the circulation medium equivalent to the wealth of the country.

P.S. – Judge Pluck, who is a faith doctor, claims the honor of curing [Pres. James] Garfield.²⁹ No sooner than he heard the sad news, he hastened to bury a black cat under his door step, nailed a horse shoe to the head of his bed, killed a garter-snake with a broom handle stretched its head out toward the North Star, and said if the tail wiggled at sundown Garfield would recover. The tail wiggled.

“Letter from Okeechobee”

Bartow *Informant*, August 18, 1881

Gabriel Cunning

Ed. *Informant*

Having occasion lately to travel from Jacksonville to Okeechobee, I feigned myself a late arrival, seeking a home in Florida, just to determine if those north and middle Florida fellows did tell as many lies and villainous slanders about south Florida as the emigrants who run the gauntlet and get through say they do.

I first took passage on a boat up the St. John's River. The passengers were from every part of north and middle Florida. I found they were all land agents. Each one gave me his card. In fact, in those upper counties a man is not entitled to vote, hold office, preach or get married unless he is a licensed land agent. Of course I was beset by them from all sides.

An old, weather beaten disciple, whom they called “deacon” and who was distributing tracts, told me his experience in oranges. He said he came to Florida six years ago, planted a quart of orange seed, and in six months they were ten feet high. He transplanted a grove of a thousand trees, and the next year they produced 1,000 oranges to the tree, which he sold at 5c, a piece. The same year in the same grove he raised 2100 crates of tomatoes, which he sold at \$13 per crate and 1100 crates of cucumbers, which realized him \$9 per crate. That he had since that time planted out 31,000 orange trees with similar success; that his groves increased in bearing fourfold every year.

I had just commenced figuring, when the dinner bell rang. After dinner he had to leave, but before starting asked me to contribute to the tract society. I gave him a dollar, which he paid on his passage, and being acquainted with the captain, begged time on the balance.

I suggested that I thought pine-apples the most profitable. At this a large, sturdy, well dressed fellow, who had a large gold-stenciled land-agency card in his hat band, said I was right, in that he had 40,000 acres of pine-apple land to sell around Orange lake – took his start on pine-apples three years ago. He planted 120 acres in pine-apples. In three months he shipped from there 1,200,000 pine-apples, which realized him a profit of \$5 on each. Since that time he had planted out 500 acres of pine-apples, and the business was still successful.

Perceiving that I was getting interested, he asked me up to the bar to “smile.” We “smiled.” He wistfully fingered his jacket pockets, looked at the barkeeper, and the barkeeper at him, and at last with a smiling not said, “Remember that, if you please.”

“Too thin,” was the gruff response. “You promised to pay old scores this trip,” said the barkeeper.

He struck out to borrow money from a friend.

I was next attacked by a tall, jewelry-bedecked gentleman, with a stove-pipe hat, whom I mistook for a member of the legislature. He desired to sell me 10,000 acres of hammock land in north Florida. He advised me to go into the vegetable business – said he followed it with success; that last winter and spring he planted 900 acres in early vegetables, that his shipments footed up 1,000,000 crates of tomatoes at \$11 a crate; 1,800 crates of cucumbers at \$9 a crate; 1,200 crates of cabbage at \$6 a crate; 500,000 crates of beans at \$5 a crate; 1,500 barrels of mutton corn at \$16 a barrel; 9,000 bushels of Irish potatoes at \$3 a bushel; that he had made arrangements with Mr. Disston for 500 Bohemian gardeners, and would then go into business right. Here he flew off and left me abruptly. A villainous constable had come aboard and levied on his trunk for an unpaid board bill, and he had to go ashore.

I now became interested with an elderly, intelligent, seedy looking Northerner. He presented me a list of his lands for sale; said he had spent a great many years in congress

from different states, and been governor of divers territories out west; had been minister to the Fijee islands, and consul to most of our important ports; that he was residing in Florida, looking to the interest of a vast running of northern capitalists that he was representing some \$20,000,000 in Florida; that he had bought a number of bearing groves for special care and amusement; that Mrs. Garfield, his niece, was coming down to spend the winter with him; that his mother was an aunt to Jefferson Davis, he himself a cousin to Robert E. Lee, his brother married a sister to Grant, and another brother married a sister to Jay Gould; that his mother was a second cousin to [Daniel] Webster, and his father distantly related to [Pres. George] Washington. He himself graduated in the same class at West Point with Alex H. Stephens, after which he studied law with Com.[Commodore] Vanderbilt. That he went on a whaling expedition once with Dr. Tahnage. He was Abe Lincoln's right-hand man during the war, and closed Horace Greeley's eyes in death. However, he voted for [Winfield Scott] Hancock,³⁰ as Hancock was a brother-in-law to his oldest son.

"And is that all?" I exclaimed, "Why, I made sure you were going to round up by making yourself father-in-law to Sitting Bull and grandfather to [Charles] Guiteau. What do you mean by leaving them out?"

The old fellow said I was poking fun at him, passionately turned on his heel, and commenced selling soap receipts and prize packages - going to the bar between sales.

Feeling that I had interviewed the "upper crust," I thought I would now strike out among the common people and see what they had to say.

On leaving the boat I found the land agency boom still at top mast. The fences were all stenciled with "Land Agency," and shingles nailed thickly to the pine trees in front as high as a man could reach with a hammer.

The first place I passed, the man was not at home. His wife wished he was. She said he was a land agent, and could fit me up, she knew. Said he was out shooting bats and buzzards to fertilize his orange grove; that most of the people in that locality set hens at the roots of their trees, but they, not being able to buy bone-dust, used bats, buzzards, rabbits and gopher-shells, which she deemed preferable. I asked if she knew anything about Polk, Hernando, Hillsboro or

Manatee counties, "Oh! dear," Said she. "Don't go there; it's awful! If you cross the Withlacoochie or the sand hills, you are a goner. Why, there's nothing but wild people down there! There's no churches, no schools, no law, no order, they raise nothing to eat, live on wild fruit and game, kill their deer and eat them with the hair on, never pick their chickens or scale their fish, and but few places where Sunday ever comes, and there they catch their children with dogs to put clean clothes on them."

"Soil's rich and country good, I presume," I said.

"Oh! me, but you are out of it again," said she, "It's all under water nine tenths of the year, and when the water sinks away, it leaves it a commingled mass of saw-grass, sand hills, mud lakes, barren scrubs, bay-heads, muck-ponds, sand-soaks, buttonwood thickets and gopher holes. If all the soil in the whole country was condensed, it wouldn't raise your hat-crown full of pirdars."

"Just so it is healthy. I shall be content," said I.

"The Lord be with me, stranger!" she exclaimed. "Why they die there like rotten



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sheep. You are never out of sight of a graveyard. The women are all widows, the men are all widowers, and the children all orphans, and oh my, just such a sickly, sunburnt, pale-faced set of squalid wretches you never saw!" And here she burst into tears and I left. She was a woman and what she said went by default.

But the next customer was a "foeman worthy of my steel" – an old, weather-beaten, rough-boned, lantern-jawed, cross-eyed, seedy soul, mounted on an ancient bobtail horse that looked just like his master. He seemed quite loquacious – told me he had been down ten miles to a lake, gíggíng gars to fertilize a greens patch, not being able to buy bone dust. I told him I was bound for south Florida – either Polk, Hernando, Hillsboro, or Manatee – not sure which.

"Oh," said he, "don't go to Hernando. Why, the niggers killed all the white inhabitances there three years ago. No white man dare to live there. It's bad as St. [Santo] Domingo, and Polk is still worse, being inhabited by a set of barbarous outlaws, who kill a man for breakfast every morning. Hillsboro and Manatee are equally objectionable from the fact the yellow fever depopulates them every two years, being on the coast.

"Well, but I am an invalid," said I, "seeking health."

"Health indeed," said he. "Keep out of south Florida. Why, I have seen the malaria so befog the air that the birds couldn't fly, and the flies, gnats and mosquitoes; not being able to fly, would lie ankle-deep along the roads. I tell you, stranger, there's insects down there and lots of them, too. I have actually seen the sun on a clear day so beclouded with horseflies, sand-flies, gad-flies, house-flies, and all other kinds of flies, that a man couldn't see his shadow to save his

life; and in all those counties the mosquitoes are so bad that they can't kindle a fire or light a lamp from the first of May to the last of August.

Said I: "How do they cool their victuals during that time?"

He replied: "oh, they just live on milk and huckleberries."

"Great place for orange groves," I remarked.

"Never saw but one bearing grove down there," he replied, "and it was in an Indian mound, and had been fertilized with rattlesnakes."

"Oh, gracious!" I exclaimed. "Is it snakey down there?"

"Snakes take care," he exultingly shouted. "Why, I've seen rattle snakes, black snakes, garter snakes, moccasins, cotton-mouths, vipers and every other kind of snake thick enough on the land to fence it, and each one from the size of a fence rail to a pine sapling! And that's not half; but a man dare not trust himself on foot there, for the alligators are large enough to swallow a half grown cow, and so vicious that they will chase a man on horse back. Now, these things I know. Being a minister, I spent many

months in these counties distributing Bibles and tracts, some years ago, and speak from actual observation.

"Well, sir," said I, "it sounds like gassing to me."

"Gassing indeed!" said he. "If you doubt my being a preacher, I'll show you my credentials."

Ramming his hand into his pantaloons, he pulled out a roll of papers. I took them and began to read, it proved to be a list of lands he had to sell. I threw it back to him, remarking:

"No more evidences of your piety, if you please. But a few words to you, with the bark

Talk of Polk county having a barbarous people, indeed! Why, sir, there are not to be found on the continent a more orderly, quiet, peaceable, pious, intelligent, enterprising people than live there. Polk county, I'll venture, today has more church-houses and fewer dancing-halls; more first-class schools and fewer dram-shops; more preachers and fewer roughs; buys more books and carries fewer revolvers; plants more orange trees and steals a less number of hogs than any county of the same population in the south. And two better counties of land never faced yonder sun than Hillsboro and Manatee.

Gabriel Cunning

on, and we dissolve. Now, old hoss, these are just the kind of tales you and these up-country folks have been preaching to immigrants about south Florida for years, but this time you waked up the wrong passenger. At present, I own a large alligator peat grove on lake Okeechobee, in sight of the ship canal,³¹ but I was principally born and raised all over these counties you speak of; and with due difference to your high calling and mission work, I am prepared to say that everything you have muttered is a viperous slander. The yellow fever never touched south Florida out of sight of tide water, and Hernando county can boast of a numerous, high-toned, intelligent, enterprising white population, and rich hammock soil – rich enough to supply all your up-country with better and cheaper fertilizers than all your bone dust, ash element, bats, buzzards, skinned rabbits, hogs' hair, chicken feathers, fish scales, Brandreth's pills and various other things you use now; and as for your snake yarns, I know that burning the woods every year has as completely liberated south Florida of snakes and living venom as St. Patrick's famous sermon did old Ireland, and I am willing to give you a quarter section of first-class saw-grass land on the public square at Okeechobee, if you can show two dozen mosquito bars in south Florida. And as for health, I can say we have but few graveyards, and they are principally filled with doctors and lawyers, who have starved to death for want of business. Besides, there are but few men in that region but what will go ten miles to find a live alligator. They are becoming valuable and scarce. Talk of Polk county having a barbarous people, indeed! Why, sir, there are not to be found on the continent a more orderly, quiet, peaceable, pious, intelligent, enterprising people than live there. Polk county, I'll venture, today has more church-houses and fewer dancing-halls; more first-class schools and fewer dram-shops; more preachers and fewer rougns; buys more books and carries fewer revolvers; plants more orange trees and steals a less number of hogs than any county of the same population in the south. And two better counties of land never faced yonder sun than Hillsboro and Manatee. Hillsboro county to day has cattle and mercantile capital enough to buy all the steamboats on St. Johns river, and all the orange groves in 20 miles of Orange lake. More than half the population of that county are

graduates from college, and have professional diplomas. And in Manatee I can safely say it has some localities settled up with as intelligent men, refined women and pretty children as you ever met with: and in proportion to its population, it takes more newspapers, reads more magazine literature, cultivates a greater variety of tropical fruits, writes more for editors; discusses more scientific questions, talks more politics, makes more speeches, holds more picnics, and bakes bigger pound cakes than any place in Christendom. And now, old fellow, I would advise you and all such up-country croakers to come down to south Florida to eat some of our grass-fattened beef, some of our corn-fed pork, stuff well on our cassava pudding and guava pies, attend our camp-meetings; reform your way, and pretty soon the scurf will slip; and in less than a fortnight you will shed more total and hereditary depravity than Adam carried out of the garden of Eden."

"But mind, I tell you, and don't you forget it, if ever you come on another mission tour through south Florida, if you don't wear different spectacles; you had better steer clear of Okeechobee, unless you have suicide on the brain, and then we won't honor you by pioneering a graveyard with you. No, sir; we will utilize you on an alligator hook."

Just then his horse frame began to scream and his cart wheels were calling for more soap as he lumbered out of sight.

Bartow Informant,
August 25, 1881
D.W.D. Bouilly

"Gabe" does not appear in the *Informant* this week, as they have organized an immigration society in Okeechobee county, and he has been employed to get up facts for the immigration circular to be issued.

"Letter from Okeechobee"
Bartow Informant, September 1, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. *Informant*

In accordance with the request of the state board of immigration, we folks of Okeechobee county, have responded by organizing our county immigration society,

consisting of Judge Pluck as president, and Maj. Plute as corresponding secretary.

Then we appointed the following committee on facts and data. Assigning to each one his respective part:

NAPOLEON B. YOUNG on longitude.

CAPT. PURDY on attitude.

SHERIFF MCKILLOP on townships.

SQUIRE MCCLINTOCK on ranges.

MRS. ANNALIZER PLUCK on climate.

MRS. CAPT. PURDY on temperature.

COL. METNUSELALI JONES on wages and prices.

GABRIEL CUNNING on ways and means of living.

After a few hours preparation the following circular was read and adopted and a copy forwarded to the state board for insertion in the pending column, "Florida As It Is."

CIRCULAR.

The latitude and longitude of Okeechobee county is superb. It can not only boast of a greater quantity than any other county on the continent, but a superior quality, the longitude being longer and the latitude wider than any county in the state.

In regards to township, they are of rather inferior quality, being made rather small, in order to supply the inhabitation with plenty of offices; but what they lack in size they make up in number. Our county court is constantly organizing new ones for the benefit of immigration.

In regards to ranges, we have the greatest variety and most extensive ranges of any country in the known world. For instance, the cattle range; which on account of its superiority now grazes the half million cattle which annually flood south Florida with Spanish gold. Then the hog ranges, out of which a thousand, fat hogs are stolen and salted down every winter. In addition to these, we have the bear range, the deer range, the alligator range and sometimes when a strange sheriff puts in an appearance, the people range extensively.

In regards to temperature, our climate is the same with winter and summer – never so cold but what young alligators can be hatched in the sun, and never hot enough

to scald the scales of the moccasins. But if it is the temperature of the people that is required; it is quite variegated. Sometimes our temperature is low; given to cold shanties, cold shoulders and freeze-outs – especially towards strangers without money. But to rich Northerners we are warm-hearted, and highly given to hot-house hospitalities.

Wages in laborers here are good, being from \$3 to \$5 a day, payable in Okeechobee scrip. Before the adoption of our county currency, a good hand could be hired for a month for two wolf scalps, or a pound of gator teeth, which was our only circulating medium at that time

The only safe criterion by which we can

determine the prices is to give the hammer rates at a recent constable's sale. Two cows brought \$10; a sow and a pig, \$11; a patch of "stand-overs", \$7; a large mule, \$15; three pecks of corn, received from time to time from the patent office, went off at the rate of \$2 a bushel; and from the

number of advertisements on the courthouse door signed by the constable, we think our stock exchange is beginning to revive.

The transportation here is abundant. Capt. McQuaig ran a successful line of transportation on the waters of Okeechobee for several months. He found a mixture of lard and water combined to facilitate his progress wonderfully. When the water is above a foot deep in the sawgrass, the crew can wade and shove the boats ... at a rapid rate. In this way the captain made regular trips... summer from Lake Tohopekaliga to the head waters of the Caloosahatchee.

In regards to the various occupations of our people and means of living, they are too numerous to mention our most reliable means of support, however, is wild or unmarked hogs, in which our country abounds. Our next best source of wealth is "hair-dicks," of which we brand a great many every year. Also at certain seasons of the year, a great many wolf scalps are taken – sufficient to pay off our state and county taxes. Of late the alligator trade has sprung up afresh, and bids fair to enrich our people

P.S. – hope the reader will excuse the monotonous repetition of South Florida to the different routes; but the legislature, by a late act, declare that all roads must be the South Florida something.

Gabriel Cunning

at no distant day. As soon as the ship canal is completed, and the Frost-line railroad in operation, we expect to ship dried muck and pulverized soil to the northern parts of our state for fertilizing purposes. But our most visible means of support is holding offices and as the organization of the county is such that each voter is entitled to an office, this alone ensures each family a bountiful support regardless of any other resources.

Having strictly complied with the requirements of the state board, we must respectfully, submit the foregoing.

Zebedee Pluck, Pres
Mag. Sitting B. Plute, Sec.

I think when the foregoing circular speaks to the migrating millions seeking homes up and down the highways of the great world, it will hurl a tidal wave of immigration into the everglades of Florida that will astonish the natives.

"Letter from Okeechobee"

Bartow *Informant*,
September 29, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. *Informant*

I am in constant receipt of letters making inquiry in regard to the railroad prospects of Okeechobee county. For the benefit of all concerned I would state that our prospects are decidedly flattering. We expect to be the grand terminus of all the principal railroads of the state, as well as of the entire continent. To describe them all would require too much time for my pen, and too much space for you columns. I will begin with the South Florida Tropical; which bids fair to be the first road completed. It is more generally known as the Adamsville, Tucker town, Gapway and Camp Ground route.

Then comes the South Florida Frost Line, which is locally known as the Sand Hill, Fort Cummings, Chipco's Camp, and Kissimmee Island line. Also the South Florida Peninsular, which is destined to cross at Lanier's bridge and Flat Ford, then by way of Sherhouse's mill, Nigger Ridge, Hooker prairie, Fort Green and Popash, to Okeechobee.

Next in order comes the South Florida Central, or "steer trail" line, which, passing through Okahumpke, steers directly south

by way of Fox town, the tanyard, and Joe Guy's cattle pens on Fish Eating Creek.

Then we will, in addition to the above, have the South Florida Freshwater Line, the South Florida Seaboard Line, the South Florida Tidewater terminus, the South Florida Express Line, and the South Florida - I don't know what all.

But the main line, upon which we mostly rely in the future, will commence at the ship canal landing on Okeechobee, and running due north towards Streely lake, Squire Boney's and Welch's mill, then on an air line by way of Cincinnati, Chicago, Duluth, and on through the British dominions to Hudson's bay. The name of this route will be the Grand South Florida Polar Star International Continental Esquimaux and Seminole triple zone line. It will be a grand trunk, triple track, and being the main road of the western hemisphere, will, without doubt, make Okeechobee the principal jumping-off place of the continent.

The county court expects to take steps to bring this line into notice. Judge Pluck and Prof. DeLacy will start in a few days to lay the project before Wall street.

We would have no trouble in obtaining the charter and receiving heavy donations from the state, was it not for a little mishap of our legislature. They, by an unfortunate oversight, gave to the different railroads eight million acres more land than the state owned; and the general government having but little more land in Florida, I fear that some of the roads will have to await the draining of the everglades, or the annexation of Cuba, to get there prorata.

P.S. - hope the reader will excuse the monotonous repetition of South Florida to the different routes; but the legislature, by a late act, declare that all roads must be the South Florida something.

"Letter from Okeechobee"

Bartow *Informant*, October 6, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. *Informant*

Amidst the clash and dash of ship canals, Disston lands, immigration, railroads, everglade drainage, Kissimmee navigation, county courts, hotels, boarding houses, and invalid sanitariums, all of which are on the boom at Okeechobee, I am at a loss to know

what to write about.

Our great railroad project, to wit: The South Florida, Polar Star, International, Continental, Esquimaux and Seminole triple zone line – the initials of the road, if the sides of a car will hold them, will be the S. F., P. S., I., C., E., and T. Z. L. As I was going to say, this great project is looming up into notice. It meets the approbation of Europe. England has already betrayed her willingness to grant the right of way, and as soon as we get the charter we wish to present the Queen with a thousand-mile ticket. But we are no little surprised to find the grand scheme meeting with opposition at home. That old king of monopolies, Jay Gould, has taken a stand against us. He is aroused, and all Wall Street is in a buzz. He is beginning to sell. At last accounts he had purchased seventy-seven congressmen. Being third-rate fellows, however, he got them at low figures, averaging about \$95 a head. He has also purchased a number of medium-priced editors, and advertised \$2,000 to any and all engineers who will report our route impracticable.

But one thing is in our favor. The long expected demise of the president has led the leading editors to sharpen their quills

and strike for higher wages. The cabinet officers have risen a hundred per cent in the last month, and a strike in the senate is daily expected.

But the most daring effort on the part of Jay Gould was to corrupt our own people, by sending a worsted dress pattern to each of our county commissioners, and a ready made suit of black alpaca to Judge Pluck. He got the wrong sow by the ear that time – you bet he did. Judge Pluck is rightly named: he is not made of bending metal: he don't sell. But he bundled J.G.'s old duds, and returned them with a letter couched in words with the bark on.

It is a long road that has no end, and Jay Gould may be nearer the jumping-off place in his career than he supposes. England is going to favor our line. English capitalists will take hold of it. And when it come to buying men, he will find that the bank of England, backed up by our Okeechobee scrip, will play the winning hand. Let Jay Gould make a few passes at Judge Pluck and our county court, and he will get it done for him. He had better take out a policy in his moccasins.

P.S. – Guiteau will necessarily be hung at no distant day. Our county court has memorialized congress, through our senators, to have the execution come off at Okeechobee. It will give South Florida notoriety, bring oceans of money into the country, and wonderfully enhance immigration. It will also bring the efficiency of our Okeechobee jute hemp before the commercial world.

“Letter from Okeechobee”

Bartow *Informant*, October 20, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. *Informant*

It has been determined upon the part of the people of Okeechobee to keep clear of lawyers, believing them to be detrimental to the good of society; and the present conditions of our county; such that litigation would work a great hardship to many of our people. For instance, many of our county officers have, through ignorance of law, charged higher fees than the law strictly allows; and some of them, through actual necessity, have been compelled to use public money, which they honestly design to



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refund so soon as the railroad comes, and they can dispose of their real estate. There are also a great many of our guardians and administrators that are, from the same cause, behind on settlement, and they and their bondmen would be ruined, was it not for the clemency of Judge Pluck – he having much of their money borrowed, which they loan him at low per cent., kindly allowing him to charge liberal costs, and paying him a little besides, he in a most noble and generous manner refrains from oppressive measures.

This being the condition of things, we well knew that the advent of a little, sniveling, strap toad lawyer in our midst would soon set Okeechobee in a buzz – would soon have all our official bondmen seated into a gin-shop, and all the old widows and orphans clapper clawing at the heels of Judge Pluck for the benefit of said lawyer collecting their estate on the halves. Such a state of affairs would ruin our prosperity, unless we burnt our courthouse; and that we hate to do. Therefore we set our faces like flint against the location of a lawyer in our midst, and were quite fortunate in cold-shouldering every one who put in his appearance, till he disappeared in the saw-grass.

But recently we got hold of rather a tough customer, who did not seem to see a point, or take a hint. Said customer was a little, box-toad, dwarf of a fellow, with right pants, swallow-tailed coat, standing collar, and a zinc trunk, full of leather-back books. He seemed determined to stay; and, despite the frown, sneers, insinuations, reproaches, rebuffs, insults, slights, reflections, cold shoulders, and such like, he persisted in remaining. Judge Pluck tried to bluff him by demanding a month's board in advance, supposing he couldn't chink; but he chinked.

Fearing he might create disturbance in our county matters, we took the precaution to hide all our court and county records in a hallow cypress. We thought this ought to check mate him, but it failed. He still stayed and nosed around, till at last he got up a little lawsuit, and filed the papers before Judge Pluck. The Judge holds court in the cypress park on the edge of the lake, at the junction of Guiteau Street and ship canal.

The case coming on, Judge Pluck took his seat upon a cypress stump cushioned with a hog-skin, while the jury occupied

two stout cabbage palmettos logs prepared for the purpose. The testimony being heard, our little upstart walked around behind a cabbage stump, on top of which he had an armful of his leather-back books stacked. He began his speech, and soon convinced the bystanders that he was an unsophisticated idiot, by using all kinds of Seminole words, which he had picked up from the squaws during his short stay among us – such terms as “*res geste*,” *lis pendens*,³² *sine qua non*,³³ *ad infinitum*,³⁴ and other Seminole gibberish, which no Indian himself, could have understood. He then opened his books and began reading and oh! forever! such sights and immensities as that poor fellow did read! He beat Bill Arp's³⁵ lawyer – no touch! He read from [William] Blackstone³⁶ on immigration, [Joseph Kinnicutt] Angell³⁷ on limitation, [James] Kent³⁸ on meditation, [Theophilus] Parsons³⁹ on concentration, [Joel Prentiss] Bishop⁴⁰ on recreation – and for my life I can't tell how many actions he did read about. But all that had any point was a story written by a fellow named Baiment on broken buggies and borrowed horses.

As he finished reading, a nigger and half-breed on the jury got to quarreling in Indian. Sheriff McKillop was lying on the pine straw sound asleep. Judge Pluck was leisurely lighting his cob pipe at the mosquito fire, paying no attention whatever to the disturbance – it being no unusual occurrence in his court. But the little Pickwickety lawyer, wishing to say something to look smart, remarked, that as the sheriff was asleep, he would recommend that the court appoint an *elisor*⁴¹ to keep order – pronouncing the word *elisor* in old style. Judge Pluck dropped his pipe, and, clenching his fists, made for the speaker, exclaiming, “You scoundrel! You villain, dog and thief! You dare insult me by asking that my wife be appointed sheriff of my own court? I'll show you, sir, that Annalizer Pluck, if she was a Minorcan when I married her, is not the wife of a county judge and mistress of a hotel and act to be scandalized by a scabbed nosed salamander like you!”

The thunder-struck attorney, who had been falling back in good order as the judge advanced, felt suddenly relieved by sheriff McKillop springing between them, and seizing the Judge in his arms, slowly hustled him back to his cypress stump. The sheriff insisted that the Judge hold his boots and

calm down, so that the lawyer could apologize or explain.

The Judge at last cooled, and the little fellow explained – you bet he explained – and to our surprise, he took up one of the leather-backed books and read, sure enough, that in case of the absence of a sheriff, the judge could appoint an officer in his place, called an *elisor*. This was a new point in Okeechobee, and slightly reflected on the ignorance of the court. The Judge felt chawed. He apologized at arm's length, and in furtherance of justice ordered Major Plute, the clerk, to enter up a fine of \$10 against himself, Zebidee Pluck, for contempt of court, payable in Okeechobee scrip.

The little spindle shanked pettifogger, elated at his triumph, pitched in with his soft-soap apologies, saying he had no design whatever of reflecting on the court; that he hardly knew the Judge was a married man, much less that his wife's name was Annalizer; that so far from intending an insult, he was rather playing the part of an *amicus curia*.

"An amicus what?" said Judge Pluck, slowly rising up.

"An *amicus curia*," said the speaker hastily. "That means 'a friend of the court.'"

"Ah shucks!" said the Judge, settling back on the stump. "I though you were calling me a half breed."

The little swallow-tail now began to realize that he was in the wrong pew, but was determined to finish his speech at the risk of blood and bullets. He went on with his argument, and presently remarked that the case in point came within the rule of *caveat emptor*.⁴²

"No it don't," said the Judge firing up. "I am judge of this court, and your case comes

within my rule, sir. Don't doubt by authority again, if you don't want to get saddled with a fine for contempt."

The little box-toe had to explain again, and then he began closing but before he got to the amen, he suggested that he had abridged his arguments and made his speeches rather *multum in parvum*.⁴³

The Judge looked fierce again, when sheriff McKillop interrupted the speaker by telling him that the Judge's knowledge of

Indians was very shaky and he had better not use any more Seminole terms. The little fellow closed in a hurry, and the judge and jury retired in the saw-grass, where the judge instructed the jury that the law and testimony were clearly in favor of the lawyer's client, but never to let that scoundrel gain a case in their midst, or he would ruin the country; therefore to find the verdict against him, and he would leave; and after the lawyer vamoosed, then he would discover an error in his own judgment, grant a new trial, and the next verdict could be according to law and evidence.

This scheme showed great legal ability upon the part of Judge Pluck, and was a wise ruling, to be sure, but proved wholly superfluous, for before the verdict was brought in, the little shinkumbranket had

gobbled traps, and was hitching his broken-horned ox between the unpeeled shafts of his rickety cart, and soon the plug-hat, box-toed, scissor-tailed-coat, zinc-trunk and leather-backed books disappeared in the saw-grass, on the route for new scenes and new adventures. And we hope and trust that he is the last of the Mohicans, in a legal line, that will ever try his fortunes at Okeechobee.

Sheriff McKillop rendered himself very

By this time our leading citizens in conclave were full and ready to explode with brilliant prospects. The future just loomed up with booms and bonanzas of wealth. Air castles of triple track railroads, ship canals, ship-crowded harbors, cities towering up around the lake, glittering spires above the saw-grass, dry docks, big steamers, millionaires, national banks, government bends, and such like, were lighting up their imaginations in bold reality. Each man felt himself a dormant partner of Vanderbilt and Astor. Judge Pluck rushed and brought out his old broadcloth suit, that had not been worn since he ran the faro bank in Tallahassee.

Gabriel Cuning

unpopular, by interfering in behalf of the little vagabond. The whole community was anxious to see Judge Pluck maul him.

There was an impudent clock-peddler in town, the other day, who had the brass to remark that lawyers were a public benefit, that in every county where they had a good bar of lawyers, the county was out of debt, and where there were few or no lawyers, the scrip was low and depreciated, and the county in debt to its eyebrows, and cited several counties in point.

You bet we made him take out state and county license quick, then charge him double fare for what time he had stayed; bought none of his clocks, but advised him, for safety of his merchandise, to locomote to new quarters. He locomoted.

“Letter from
Okeechobee”

Bartow *Informant*,
December 10, 1881
Gabriel Cunning
Ed. *Informant*

Our town has recently underwent another serious disaster. The circumstances are as follows:

About a week ago a tall, raw-boned tramp, with tattered raiment, rundown stogas, and seedy stove-pipe hat, put in his appearance at the upper end of town, with an old pocket compass, a dirty haversack slung to his side, a hatchet handle sticking through the corner, with a bundle of stakes under one arm. Every hundred yards he would stop and drive a stake, then step off another hundred yards and drive another stake. In this way he continued on down Main Street to the landing, where he waded in to his arm-pits, drove a long stake, and then sighted through his compass for a long time in a curious direction across the lake.

This rather novel spectacle excited great curiosity among our people who were soon crowding around the mysterious stranger, and asking him all manner of questions in regard to this objective point, to all of which he gave the most evasive answers. But after coming to shore and figuring in this blank book for a time, he surveyed the crowd around him, and settling his eye on Rev. Napoleon B. Young, who happened to have on his broadcloth coat, he winked him out of the crowd, and told him his business was a

profound secrete he would not have [David Levy] Yulee⁴⁴ and Disston find it out for the world; but desired that a few of the most trusty citizens meet him in a private room at the hotel, where he would entrust them with the objective point. Then receiving direction to Judge Pluck's sanitarium, he made his way there in wet boots and breeches.

Soon, Judge Pluck, Rev. Napoleon B. Young, Sheriff McKillop, Squire McClintock, Capt. Purdy and Major Plute were all snugly ensconced in the presence of the mysterious stranger, with closed doors. He introduced himself to their confidence as Prof. De La Gong, a step-son of Gen. [Winfield Scott] Hancock; that a heavy engineer corps was then engaged in surveying the great Chimborazo, Continental, Peninsular, Frost-line, South American railway; that it was the greatest project of the age; that Vanderbilt and [John Jacob] Astor had taken it in hand to corner Jay Gould and Grant in their Mexican project, by binding the two hemispheres in one grand chain of transportation; that the plan was a triple track railway from New York to Cape Sable, the southern point of the United States, there to connect with a heavy line of steamers, that would connect at Panama with a grand central trunk line designed to pass down through central part of South America, terminating at Cape Horn; that Lake Okeechobee was to be the great inland harbor of the ship canal, therefore must be made the principal point in the Northern line. Then taking from his pocket a tattered map of Florida, he showed the established route heavily drawn with a pencil from where it crossed the northern boundary of the state to within about twenty miles of Okeechobee. That the corps, consisting of about 100 men, with all their teams, tents and equipage, were encamped there, resting, while Col. Vanderbilt, a nephew to the great millionaire, who was superintending the survey, had taken an eastern route to our town, on horseback, while he, the professor, being the chief surveyor, had taken his light pocket compass and come through on foot, in order to form a rough estimate of the nature and distance of the route; that he was sadly disappointed in not finding the Colonel there awaiting his arrival. It placed him in rather a state of destitution among strangers. Being a pioneer railroad man, he knew he would encounter scrubs, swamps and saw-grass, therefore he had worn the hardest old suit of clothes he could borrow in camp, which, by

a tight squeeze, had lasted him through. But, fortunately, he had underwent similar experiences before, having been frequently caught in scrapes of the kind when surveying the North Pacific, Texas Central, and various western routes. That he hoped, under the circumstances, they would favor him with the necessaries of life, and render him comfortable till the Colonel arrived, who had plenty of funds, and would lay in heavy supplies. And for the present, if it wouldn't be intruding too much on their hospitality, he would like the favor of a suit of dry clothes, and in a smiling mood said, if it would be no offence to their temperance proclivities, he was in good condition to accept a glass of good whisky.

By this time our leading citizens in conclave were full and ready to explode with brilliant prospects. The future just loomed up with booms and bonanzas of wealth. Air castles of triple track railroads, ship canals, ship-crowded harbors, cities towering up around the lake, glittering spires above the saw-grass, dry docks, big steamers, millionaires, national banks, government bends, and such like, were lighting up their imaginations in bold reality. Each man felt himself a dormant partner of Vanderbilt and Astor. Judge Pluck rushed and brought out his old broadcloth suit, that had not been worn since he ran the faro bank in Tallahassee. Then he whispered to Major Plute to run home and bring up that "biled" shirt and gold-washed studs he wore when he went to the capital to get his appointment from Gov. Bloxham.

Before the Major arrived with the shirt and studs, Capt. Purdy, who had an eye to the Colonel's money put in a appearance with a box of collars, some underwear, and the best hat and pair of boots he had. And before the stranger could be redressed, sheriff McKillop, who runs a moral drug store, came dashing in with a pound of sugar, a quart of Cognac, and a handful of goblets.

The professor, by this time was dressed, except that the Judge's coat proved moth-eaten at the elbows. So Rev. Napoleon B. Young, who expected the job of guide to the corps through the everglades, kindly removed his fine broadcloth coat and contributed it to the outfit.

The professor being dressed dry on the outside, dampened his inside by putting himself on the outside of a heavy draught of

Cognac. The leading citizens, feeling quite railroadish, heartily imbibed the remainder. By this time Mrs. Annalizer Pluck, who had eaves-dropped the entire deliberations, announced dinner for the stranger, who retired for refreshments, while the leading citizens held a hurried consultation how to shape their ends to get the biggest pile out of the railroad men. It was apparent that the entire corps would be down on us in a few days; that they would eat Judge Pluck's hotel to a famine the first meal, buy our Capt. Purdy's store instanter and drink the moral drug store dry before going to bed; that Col. Vanderbilt had scads of money; that the hungry, ragged hands would not regard prices in the least. Therefore Capt. Purdy was to mark up his goods about 300 per cent above cost. Sheriff McKillop, by the aid of fish berries and tobacco juice, could dilute his alcohol some 500 per cent; Judge Pluck was to prepare to entertain as large a crowd as possible, and put his rate to \$5 per day; Squire McClintock with the two half breeds was to scour the country and kill hogs with out regard to mark or brand, and prepare heavy supplies of meat; Maj. Plute, with a nigger to help, was to repair to Bird Roost Island and cut several boat loads of palmetto cabbage, and catch catfish and corral them in a lagoon. No sooner were the plan laid then each man went to work.

Prof. De La Gong spent the evening, and till late at night, drawing a plat of the lake and the route leading thereto, on goods box linings found at the store. He also drew a plat of the future town of Okeechobee, containing about five miles square of dense city, including parks, gardens, grounds, wharfs, forts and the like, but next morning said he must go back about a mile and run in again to straighten a slight crook in the line where he had lost his variation. This time he ran smack through Judge Pluck's hotel, Captain Purdy's establishment, and slightly tipped the corner of the moral drug-store. He said it was very unfortunate for the citizens, for Col. Vanderbilt would order them pulled off the survey as soon as he arrived, provided he reported to him the true line.

Our leading citizens were at first greatly non-plused, but finally persuaded him with \$40 down and their bills for \$60 more, when the Colonel came, not to report the crook. He suggested that it would be best to buy what things he and the Colonel and his



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staff might want before the corps of roughs arrived. So Capt. Purdy put off on him a suit of clothes for himself, a suit for the Colonel, a large cheese, a case of oysters, a case of sardines, a box of crackers and various sundries. He also took five gallons of sheriff McKillop's Cognac brandy. By this time he became very anxious about the Colonel; what was detaining him was a mystery. That night he walked the streets till late looking for the Colonel. Next morning he called the leading citizens together to take steps to develop the Colonel. Accordingly he proposed that the leading citizens follow the survey up to camp. And if the Colonel had not returned to camp, for them to guide the corps down to town, while he would take Squire McClintock's shot-gun and his compass and go on the eastern route, and perhaps meet the Colonel, and bring him in, the leading citizens started, but before they had gone 10 miles they found the blazes growing dim and the stakes getting fewer in number. At last the survey ran into a swamp hammock, which they waded, and followed it into a deep morass, in which Judge Pluck, who was foremost, sank to his chin and had to be pulled out with long poles. After trying all evening to follow the survey they camped for the night, and next morning took a circuitous route and went to camp, the whereabouts of which had been located so they knew where it was. But oh! What was their chagrin and disappointment to find neither men, mules, tents, wagons, or even tracks of the same. The only thing to show any signs of identity was the word "sold" hacked with a hatchet on several of the large pines. They now smelt the rat. For the first time the leading citizens began to suspicion that Prof. De La Gong was a fraud. Hungry, wearied and hurriedly they retraced their steps to have an explanation of bait their alligator hooks with him that night. But they proved too late, for they had not been gone but a few hours before he returned in great excitement, stating that he learned from an Indian that Col. Vanderbilt with part of his staff was down on the lake about six miles east sloshing about among the lagoons trying to find their way into town, accordingly he piled all his purchases into the best boat, and borrowing a blanket, overcoat and umbrella, set sail in search of the Colonel. And from that day to this, our enraged citizens have never heard hair nor hide of him, or his Colonel, or his corps.

Such is Life.

But the loss of Purdy's goods, Judge Pluck's vest and breeches, Maj. Plutes "biled" shirt and "shootly," Rev. Napoleon B. Young's new coat, sheriff McKillop's Cognac, and the Squire's shot-gun, are nothing to compare to the loss in preparation. Squire McClintock has the woods stinking with piles of spoilt meat and no salt to save it; Sheriff McKillop diluted his alcohol till it soured and had to be thrown out; Judge Pluck had gilled his cribs, stables, sheds and back-lots with green moss bunks and hung the turkey oak grove before his door with cow-skin hammocks preparing to lodge the whole corps. His house stinks with sour victuals, and the old duds shed off by Prof. De La Gong have completely stocked his sanitarium with specimens of animated nature. Away with railroad men! Okeechobee is done with them. The next one who starts to tour our town had better write and leave his last words behind him, and say his prayers as he enters town, for this is doomed. Words are inadequate to express our rage and disappointment.

This zany story was the last surviving dispatch that Gabriel Cuning wrote to either the Bartow *Informant* or the Tampa *Sunland Tribune*. While Cuning's true identity will probably never be known, his humorous missives provide modern readers with some interesting insights into the mindset, time, and place of late nineteenth century South Florida.

ENDNOTES

James M. Denham is a professor of history at Florida Southern College, where he also directs the Center for Florida History. Before joining the FSC history faculty in 1991, Dr. Denham held teaching appointments at Florida State University, where he earned his Ph.D degree in 1988, Georgia Southern University, and Limestone College in Gaffney, South Carolina. His articles and reviews have appeared in many scholarly journals and newspapers. He is the author of "A Rogue's Paradise: Crime and Punishment in Antebellum Florida 1821-1861" (Tuscaloosa, 1997); *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives: the Florida Reminiscences of George Gillette Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams* (Columbia, 2000), with Canter Brown, Jr.; and *Florida Sheriffs: A History, 1821-1945* (Tallahassee, 2001), with William W. Rogers. An award-winning author and public speaker, Denham was awarded the Florida Historical Society's Arthur W. Thompson Prize in 1992. In 1997, he was appointed a fellow to the Grady McWhiney Research Foundation, an organization committed to advancing the research

of southern and military history. He has served fellowships at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the University of South Carolina, the University of Wisconsin, Harvard University, and the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle, NC. Denham lives in Lakeland.

1. Cuning's "Okeechobee County" did not exist in 1881. It was not formerly established until May 9, 1917. In 1880, four counties touched the shores of Lake Okeechobee: Manatee, Brevard, Dade and Monroe. See Edward A. Fernald and Elisabeth D. Purdum, eds., *Atlas of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 96-98.
2. On the post Civil War Cattle Industry as it emerged in Florida see Joe Akerman, *Florida Cattleman: A History of Florida Cattle Raising* (Kissimmee: Florida Cattlemen's Association, 1976), 100-59; Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 195-204; idem, *Fort Meade, 1849-1900* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 52-67; Karl H. Grismer, *Story of Fort Myers* (St. Petersburg Printing Company Inc., 1949), 78-102; Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise: A Chronicle of Man and the Land in Florida* (William Morrow and Company, 1989), 97-104; Jim Janosky, *Okeechobee - A Modern Frontier* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 6-7.
3. These figures are based on the cattle prices at \$14 per head. *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, November 16, 1878.
4. *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, August 14, 1879. For a fuller treatment of the numbers, shippers, and shipping points see "The Cattle Trade," in "Letter from Florida" in *Ibid.*, November 6, 1879.
5. Brown, *Fort Meade*, 54-55, 124; Fernald and Purdum, *Florida Atlas*, 101.
6. A good general overview of population and agricultural productions of Hillsborough, Polk, and Manatee Counties can be found in "Florida As it is," *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, January 15, 1881.
7. Harry A. Kersey, *Pelts, Plumes and Hides: White Traders Among the Seminole Indians, 1870-1930* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1975), 13; James W. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 154-159.
8. For a contemporary description of Manatee (both the village and the county) see *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, July 27, 1878. "The village, or settlement known as Manatee, is by no means closely built up as a regularly laid off town, but is divided off into lots containing from four to ten acres on which the owner resides and has the balance set out in an orange grove with other semi-tropical fruits interspersed. The houses are mostly of a plain cottage style, built of wood and ceiled or plastered inside and painted; and embowered, as the majority are in umbrageous fruit trees, the effect is extremely pleasant and inviting." The correspondent also noted that the village had five or six stores. Two or three steamers full of cattle are taken per week to the Havana market. Subsequent description in *Ibid.*, May 27, 1880. See also Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay* (Tulsa: Caprine Press, 1983).
9. On December 13, 1879, Cuss Finger, a correspondence to the *Tampa Guardian*, reported that "Fort Ogden was improving. It had three stores and a drinking saloon. In the absence of a clerk there can be no license obtained to sell whiskey or get married, so we have for the time being to suspend both drinking and marrying."
10. On Fort Bassinger, see Audrey Vickers, "A Last Look at Fort Bassinger?" *Sebring Highlands Today*, February 25, 2002.
11. *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, March 22, 1879. Meigs's expedition is described in *Ibid.*, April 19, 1879.
12. Martlow, "Correspondence," *Tampa Guardian*, March 13, 1880.
13. For Florida political affairs during this time see Edward C. Williamson, *Florida Politics in the Gilded Age* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1976); Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 53; Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867-1924* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 1-69; Jerrell H. Shofner, "Reconstruction and Renewal, 1865-1877," in Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 261-64; Bentley Orrick and Harry L. Crumpacker, *The Tampa Tribune: A Century of Florida Journalism* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 1998), 21-29; William W. Rogers and James M. Denham, *Florida Sheriffs: A History, 1821-1945* (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2001), 118-28.
14. One Florida example of Cuning's style can be seen in the writings of George Gillett Keen. See James M. Denham and Canter Brown, Jr., *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives: The Florida Reminiscences of George Gillett Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000). For a general overview of southern humorists and postbellum southern literary traditions see Louis D. Rubin, *Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); J.V. Ridgely, *Nineteenth-Century Southern Literature* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1980); William Cooper and Thomas Terrill, *American South* (New York: McGraw Hill), 641-42.
15. Gabriel Cuning, "Letter from Okeechobee," *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, November 16, 1878.
16. Cuning is no doubt referring to the southern tip of the "Florida Ridge," which extends down to the bottom of present day Highlands County, at that time Manatee County. For an elevation map see Edward A. Fernald and Elisabeth D. Purdum, eds., *Atlas of Florida*, 37.
17. There were hundreds of Indian temple and ceremonial mounds, burial mounds, and habitation mounds scattered throughout Florida in the mid nineteenth century. In Lake Okeechobee region, in the 1880's, the mounds were untouched by tourism and for the most part humanity, standing as proud relics to the Indian nations that once lived in South Florida. See Jerry N. McDonald & Susan L. Woodward, *Indian Mounds Of The Atlantic Coast: A Guide To Sites From Maine To Florida* (Newark: The McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, 1987), 41-45; Lawrence Will, *Cracker History Of Okeechobee: "Custard Apple, Moonvine, Catfish, and Moonshine"* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors, 1964), 18-19; Randolph Twidmer, *The Evolution of the Caloosa: A Nonagricultural Cheifdom on the Southwest Florida Coast* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 6, 36-46, 86-94.
18. Philip Dzialynski was a Jewish businessman of Cuning's time, and owned stores in Bartow, Orlando and Fort Meade. Dzialynski was also a real estate agent, citrus grove and hotel owner as well as serving on the Polk County board of county commissioners. See Canter Brown Jr., *In The Midst Of All That Makes Life Worth Living: Polk County, Florida to 1940* (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2001), 122-124, 264; and Canter Brown Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando: University of Central

- Florida Press, 1991), 302-303.
19. William D. Bloxham (1835-1911) served as Governor of Florida from 1881-1885, and again from 1897-1901. One of his administration's first acts was to sell Hamilton Disston 4 million acres of land at \$.25 per acre. Bloxham was sworn in as governor only a few months before Cuning's first article appeared in the *Informant*. See Allen Morris and Joan Perry Morris, eds, *The Florida Handbook* (Tallahassee: The Peninsular Publishing Company, 1997), 321.
 20. Hamilton Disston (1844-1896) purchased four million acres in South Florida east of the Peace River and north and east of Lake Okeechobee from the state of Florida for \$.25 per acre in 1881. The purchase also included lands on both sides of the Caloosahatchee River. Within months after the purchase, Disston's company was initiating his scheme to drain and sell lands within the purchase. The first local mention of the Disston scheme appeared in the "The Okeechobee Enterprises," *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, March 5, 1881. Disston and his associates formed the East Florida Coast Canal and Okeechobee Land Company and arrived in Jacksonville, Florida in May 1881, to organize their enterprise. *Ibid.*, May 7, 1881. See also "Everglade Sceme" and "Sale of Four Million Acres," *Ibid.*, June 18, 1881. See Will, *Cracker History of Okeechobee*, 108-113; Brown, *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 261-262; Brown, *In The Midst of All That Makes Life Worth Living*, 132-133, 140, 148, 196; Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River Of Grass* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1988), 281-283; Joe Knetsch, "Hamilton Disston and the Development of Florida," *Sunland Tribune: Journal of the Tampa Historical Society* 24 (1998), 5-19; Charlton Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 278; Orrick and Crumpacker, *The Tampa Tribune*, 24-25; David McCally, *The Everglades: An Environmental History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 61-62; Gannon, *Florida, A Short History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 53.
 21. Common derogatory names for French people and German people were Frogs and Krauts in corresponding order.
 22. Cuning is referring to an unpopular law passed by the Florida legislature, taxing improvements squatters made on state lands. The tax Cuning is referring to is discussed in *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, July 30, August 18, 1881.
 23. Allen H. Bush, *A Digest of the Statute Law of Florida* (Tallahassee: Charles H. Walton, State Printer, 1872).
 24. George P. Raney (1845-1911) was attorney general for the state of Florida (1877-1885). See Allan Morris and Joan Perry Morris, eds, *The Florida Handbook*, 321; John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds, *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 18:139-140 (Hereinafter ANB.)
 25. Charles Devens was U.S. attorney general during the administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes.
 26. *Holy Bible*, Romans 4:15.
 27. *Holy Bible*, Revelation 15.
 28. George F. Drew (1827-1900), a Democrat, served as governor of Florida from 1877-1881. He owned the largest sawmill in Florida at Ellaville on the Suwanee River, and at one time had ten other mills in operation. Allen and Joan Morris, eds, *The Florida Handbook*, 321.
 29. President James Garfield (1831-1881) was shot by Charles J. Guiteau on July 2, 1881, and died on September 19. The first local coverage of the shooting appeared in the *Tampa Sunland Tribune*, July 9, 1881.
 30. Winfield Scott Hancock (1824 -1886), a Democrat, lost to James Garfield in the presidential election of 1880.
 31. Cuning is probably referring to the Three Mile Canal that connected the southwest corner of Lake Okeechobee with Lake Hicpochee, close to the present day town of Moore Haven.
 32. *Lis pendens* is Latin for "a pending lawsuit."
 33. *Sine qua non* is Latin for "without which cause not."
 34. *Ad infinitum* is Latin for "to infinite."
 35. Charles Henry Smith (Bill Arp) (1826-1903), a Georgia lawyer and politician, wrote many humorous letters published in the Rome, Georgia *Southern Confederacy*, similar to those of Gabriel Cuning, signed with the name Bill Arp. See L. Moody Simms, *ANB*, 20:150-151.
 36. William Blackstone (1723-1780) was a English legal scholar and the author of *Commentaries On The Law Of England* (1765-1769). His *Commentaries* served to educate lawyers and judges in the United States for decades and was the most influential book in English law. See Richard A. Cosgrove, *Dictionary of World Biography*, 4:129-131.
 37. Joseph Kinnicutt Angell (1794-1857), a prominent legal writer, was the author of *Treaties On The Common Law In Relation To Watercourses* (1824) and *Right Of Property In Tidewater And In The Soil And Shores Thereof* (1826). See Mark Warren Bailey, *ANB*, 1:524-525.
 38. James Kent (1762-1847), a prominent American lawyer and legal scholar, was the author of *Commentaries On American Law*. See Donald M. Roper, *ANB*, 12:596-599.
 39. Theophilus Parsons (1797-1882) was the editor of the *United State Literary Gazette*. He was also the author of *The Elements Of Mercantile Law* (1856); *Law Of Business For Business Men* (1857); and *The Law Of Contracts from 1853 to 1855*. See Francis Helminski, *ANB*, 17:95-96.
 40. Joel Prentiss Bishop (1814-1901), a legal scholar, wrote *Of The Law Of Marriage And Divorce* (1852). See Stephen A. Siegel, *ANB*, 2:830-832.
 41. An *elisor* is one of two persons appointed by a court to return a judgment or serve a writ when the sheriff and the coroners are disqualified.
 42. *Caveat emptor* is Latin for "let the buyer beware."
 43. *Multum in parvum* is Latin for "many in one."
 44. David Levy Yulee (1810-1886) was a prominent Florida politician, businessman, and railroad builder. See Patrick K. Williams, *ANB*, 24: 201-202.