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The Spanish American War South of Tampa Bay

Pamela N. Gibson and Ann Shank

There were fewer than 3000 residents in the Manatee County of 1898, which included the present Sarasota County, but they were involved with the island of Cuba more than a year before the United States went to war with Spain and sympathies were squarely with the insurgents. When "the situation" made its way into the local paper, the *Manatee River Journal*, on October 28, 1897, concern was for hurriedly re-supplying the revolutionaries before Spain executed its threat to apply open "search and seizure" rules to ships in Cuban waters flying the Stars and Stripes. The *Dauntless*, run by Capt. "Dynamite" Johnny O'Brien, and *Silver Heel* were both openly carrying contraband.

The South Florida papers expressed annoyance with the new U.S. anti-filibuster blockade of Florida's ports, as well as the Cuban search and seizure efforts. A special report from Punta Gorda to the *Times-Union* and the *Citizen*, and carried in the Manatee paper, related how all vessels in Charlotte Harbor had been searched by the U.S. Cruiser *Montgomery* and the cutters *Forward* and *McLane*. Acting on a tip that a filibustering expedition was about to leave for Cuba, they found no armaments. By Christmas time that year, however, the local markets were full of hams and turkeys and the *Journal* commented, "Seems like the Florida folks are off beef!"

Adding to the impression that the Cubans were suffering, and thus needing U.S. support, was an October report from Major A. M. Wilson, a cattleman and postmaster of Miakka, Florida. Having returned home from Havana via New York (because he didn't have a yellow fever health certificate), Tampa, and Braidentown, Wilson brought news of displaced people dying of starvation or dying after gorging themselves on relief supplies. Wilson, who was later elected to one term in the Florida Senate and two in the Florida House of Representatives, opened that "principally on account of this curse of yellow fever it is to be hoped Cuba will be brought under some new form of government. In Havana the fever never dies and Spanish shiftlessness has made the great seaport a menace to the health of the world." Just apply some Yankee energy to quarantine plus efficient boards of health, however, and "this great historical terror of mankind will pass away! "

Area cattlemen such as Wilson were eager to supply beef for the island. The *Journal* quoted a *Fort Myers Press* report of October 26, 1897, that 872 head of cattle left Punta Rassa, purportedly bound for Cuba. A further 1200-1500 cattle were expected to leave Port Tampa, despite the report from a Cuban cattle buyer that Florida's high cattle prices were ruining the trade. The first week of November saw 765 more cattle shipped from Punta Rassa and Fulton Brothers sent 743 head from Port Tampa at \$13.25. Since the cost of the



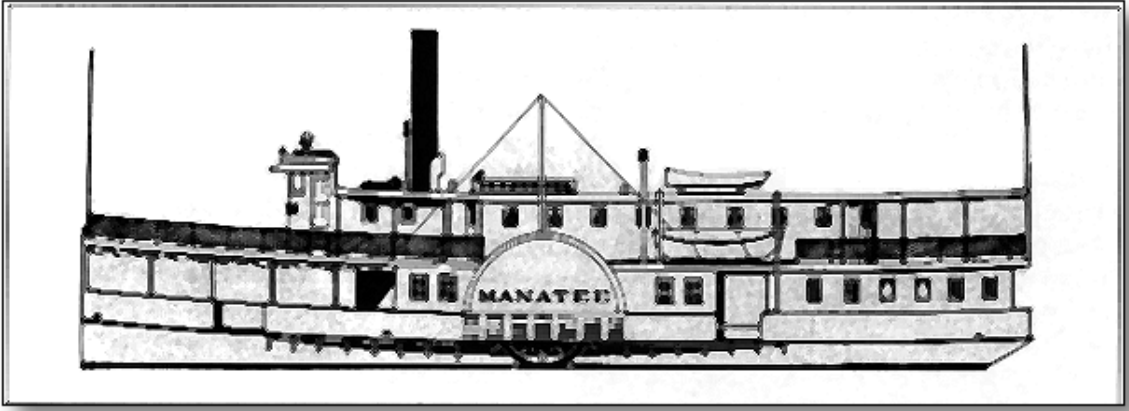
Finely dressed residents pose in 1896 on the unpaved main street of Braidentown, later changed to Bradenton.

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Library System.

beef on arrival in Cuba would be around \$29.89, it was small wonder that the people of Cuba were starving. In the December 2nd issue of the *Manatee River Journal*, Florida's cattle stocks were reported to be nearly exhausted, forcing prices higher. Cubans were expected to buy stock cattle for the Cuban ranges as they had earlier done. Thus, local "cattle kings came in for their full share of prosperity, which is now permeating the county."

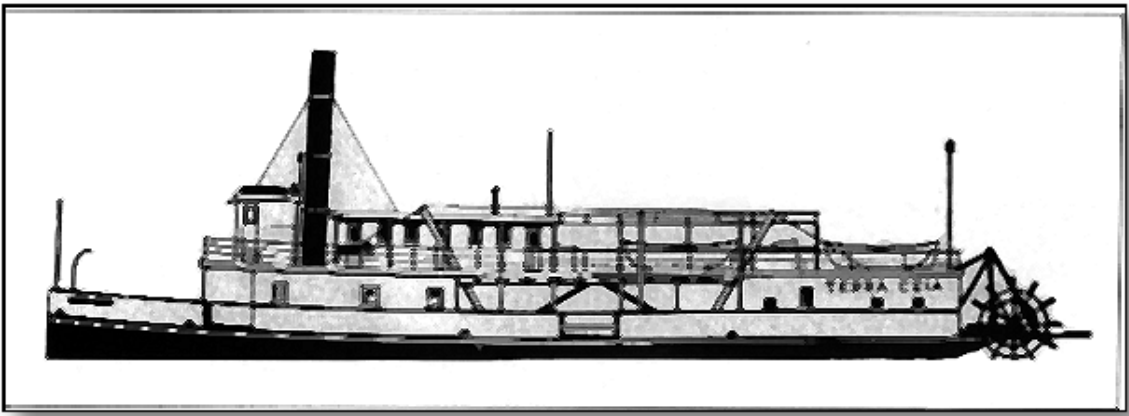
Manatee River Journal founder Joseph H. Humphries returned to edit the paper with the issue of January 20, 1898. He did not stint on coverage of news from Havana. He expected that, if push came to shove with Spain, the main thrust of the war would be fought from Florida. Soldiers have to eat, and providing food for an extra 100,000 or so would be very nice for the local citrus and vegetable growers.

On February 15, 1898, the U.S. Battleship *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor. The *Manatee River Journal* remained calm, with perhaps some sarcasm for the Spanish position. In what began as an item of strictly local and commercial interest, on March 10 the paper introduced its readers to the *Terra Ceia*, a new steamer of the Independent Line. While the steamer was purchased to supplement the *Manatee* on its runs between the Manatee River and Tampa, it took on unexpected war-related significance for the residents of Sarasota. That tiny community, too small to be listed in the 1900 census and lying about 45 miles south of Tampa on Sarasota Bay, felt vulnerable to Spanish invasion. John Hamilton Gillespie, manager for the company which had sold land to a colony from Scotland 13 years earlier, is quoted as having written to his mother in Scotland, "I fully expect if war comes



The *Manatee*, built in Newburgh, New York in 1884, sailed to Braidentown in October of that year and provided passenger service between Tampa, St. Petersburg, Terra Ceia and Manatee River ports.

Art courtesy of the Manatee County Public Library System.



Formerly the *Welaka*, purchased in 1898 by the Independent Line Steamers of Tampa, the *Terra Ceia*, shown above in 1898, carried passengers and freight between Tampa Bay ports and points along- the Manatee River to Ellenton.

Art courtesy of the Manatee Count Public Library System.

that every house in the place will be burnt I have applied to the authorities for protection but I think they have not enough protection for themselves, far less for us."

When the *Tampa Daily Times* alerted readers via an extra edition that "The Crisis Has Come!" on April 7, war was "no longer doubted." While the U.S. Naval Flying Squadron was going to sea,

the first real war scare took place in Sarasota. It seems that Capt. John J. Fogarty of the *Manatee* had been sent to Jacksonville to pick up the new steamer, the *Terra Ceia*. According to his later account, he had been on a three-week cruise along the "east coast canal and inland water ways which were so narrow and shallow that not more than a mile an hour could be made." After rounding the Keys, he intended to head straight up the



M. Hans Wyatt, sheriff of Manatee County from 1905 through 1913, shown in 1898 in the uniform of the Tampa Rifles of the U. S. 6th Infantry. Wyatt, who saw action in Cuba, was erroneously reported as killed at the battle of San Juan Hill.

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Library System.

west coast to Tampa. However, as Fogarty told the story, "wood having run short aboard the steamer," he decided to "run into Sarasota for a few cords to take him to Tampa."

A perfect stranger on the coast, this new steamer of course attracted the attention of an observer in the cupola atop the Belle Haven Inn as soon as she entered the bay. Since the steamer was quite large and coming from the south, or, the direction of Cuba, everyone began guessing, and, as the story goes, concluded it was a Spanish Man-of-War. The only way to escape the expected cruelties of Spanish captivity, as they had been pictured, would be to take to the woods, which many did before the Stars and Stripes became discernible to those on shore. Fogarty recounted that "among the number who escaped to the woods were a prominent merchant and a hotel man, but fortunately the mistake was discovered before they reached the Myakka swamps and couriers were sent out to advise them of the error."

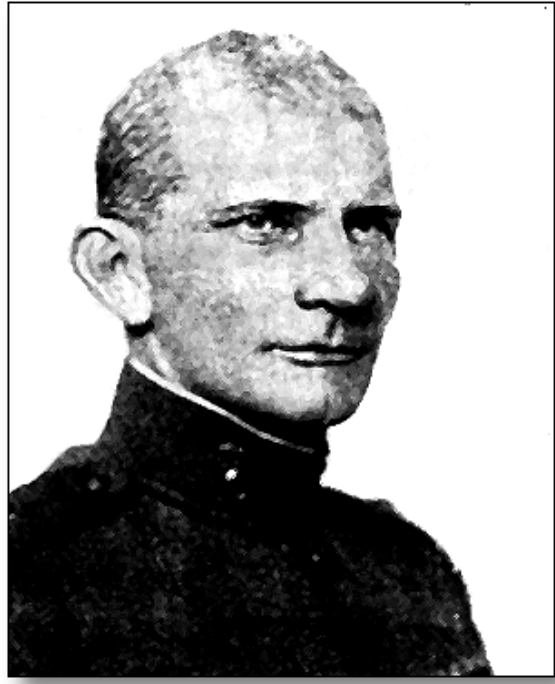
The *Manatee River Journal* opened its April 28 issue with the words WAR and TAXES. Under the heading "War at Last" was the announcement of the Presidential declaration and blockade of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Next to it was the heading "Battles Bring Taxes" and a discussion of the Congressional revenue bill, which would include taxes on tea and coffee. The *Journal* had an on-going economic perspective on "the situation." By war's outbreak, the chances of selling local produce were great. As U. S. Navy Admiral Dewey's attack finished the war in the Philippines, on May 5 the paper cautioned local farmers to "plant sweet potatoes and rice." Good food "for home consumption as well as for the market" would be needed.

Most of the April news naturally concerned events in Tampa, but local, first-hand, accounts added an immediacy to

the situation. The H.F. Curry family returned to Curry's Point on the Manatee River from Key West, reporting that troops sent to Key West were causing so much trouble that the city was going to be placed under "Marshal's" law. Nearer home, a detachment of the naval militia from Tampa and Port Tampa arrived at the Egmont and Mullet Key batteries as guards and to display signals.

At the beginning of the war with Spain, the U.S. regular army was so understaffed that on April 22, 1898, Congress authorized the mustering of volunteer companies. Twelve of Florida's twenty companies formed the First Florida Infantry in May 23, 1898. "FOR DEFENSE" the headlines read as meetings were held in Braidentown "by our citizens for the purpose of providing a means of defense against a possible attack of Spaniards There will shortly be an organized body of men in Braidentown abundantly prepared to meet any emergency." George Riggan, A. T. Cornwell, Sr., and Harry Wadham composed the committee appointed to correspond with Adjutant General Houston about the Home Guard volunteers and to secure any arms that the state or federal government might provide.

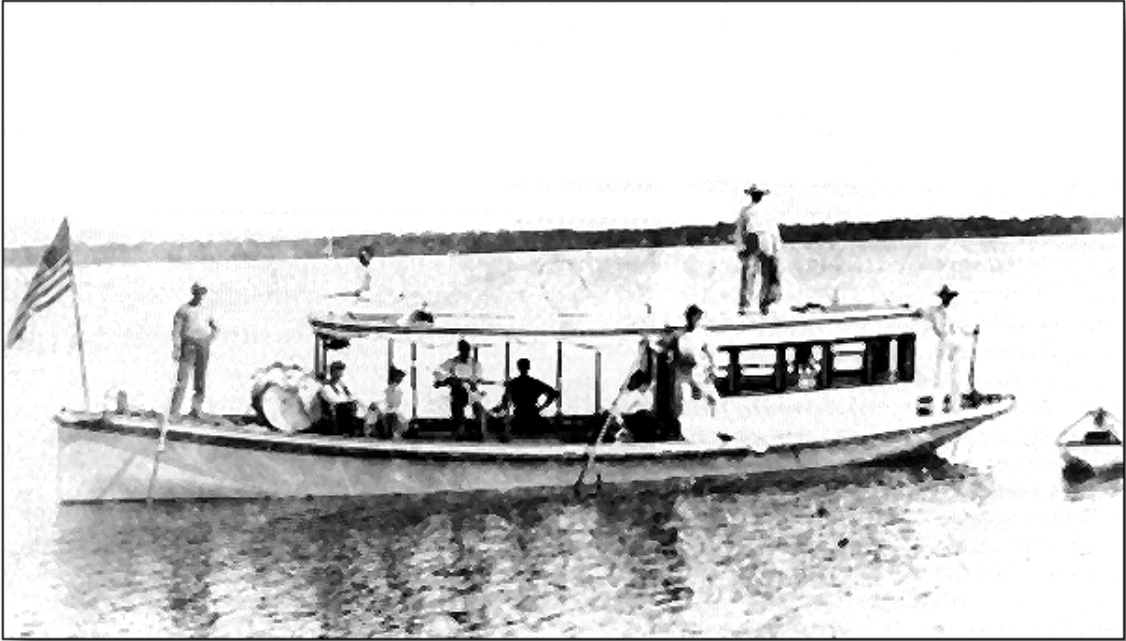
By May 12, many more men had signed up for the Home Guard than was required. Their names and the bond for forty guns and ammunition were forwarded to state headquarters. Within two weeks the forty guns arrived. Judge J. J. Stewart arranged for a meeting at the courthouse to organize the Guards and elect officers. H.W. Fuller was elected captain, with Judge Stewart and H. G. Reed as First and Second Lieutenants. Dr. C. W. Ballard offered



Brigadier General William C. Harlee, U. S. Marine Corps, shown above as a Lt. Colonel, circa 1919, saw combat in Manilla, Corregidor and other battles in the Pacific. He was the subject of the book by John Harlee, *The Marine from Manatee*.

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Library System.

room #7 in the Ballard Block on Main Street in Braidentown for storing the guns until the county commission could provide a proper armory. Dr. Ballard, by unanimous vote, was elected an honorary member of the company. The name "Braidentown Home Guards" was officially adopted and the regular members included J. W. Johnstone, Harry Wadham, T. C. Walton, T. Emmett Hunter, Charles Stuart, S. S. Curry, W. D. Hicks, J. S. Knight, Charles Duckwall, W. H. Hall, S. H. Highsmith, R. C. Trimble, E. L. Blakely, J. H. Humphries, W. C. Patten, Jr., C. C. McGinty, E. B. Camp, and W. B. Coarsey. They came from throughout the



The *Zephyr*, the first motor-powered boat to play the Manatee River in regularly scheduled ferry service, was leased to the U.S. government and used to patrol the river against the possibility of invasion by Spain. The *Zephyr* was returned to its former peacetime role after the Spanish-American War. The crew, shown armed with rifles and shotguns, never had to fire their weapons in defense of the river.

Photograph courtesy of the Manatee County Library System.

county, from Palmetto and the north to Venice in the south.

Newly-elected Captain Fuller adjourned the company to the Methodist Ladies' ice cream stand while the guns were delivered to the temporary storage. Later that evening, Lt. Stewart had the squad out for a short drill. The press reported, "He claimed he has good material for a company" and proposed "to lead everything on the river if the boys will give enough of their time to drills."

Journal editor Humphries had "the boys" in mind when he suggested plans for the 4th of July. A program affording amusement for all should include "athletic sports, boat races and ... a military drill contest between the

Braidentown Home Guards and companies organized in Manatee and Palmetto." He suggested the ladies make or buy a flag to be presented to the best drilled company on the 4th.

Col. Charles C. Whitaker, who had grown up on Sarasota Bay, came down from his home in Tampa to Braidentown and participated in the Home Guard's target practice. Whitaker was described in the *Journal* as "a military man of experience, having advanced from private to major, having held every one of the intermediate offices." Seventeen Home Guards participated in the practice, firing four rounds each. Few scores were made, indicating the necessity for continuous practice. The

officers called for a full turnout for the 4th of July.

As if he did not have enough to do, Judge Stewart then began organizing a company of volunteers for enlistment in the war in Cuba. All able-bodied men between 18 and 40 were asked to contact the Judge. While a number sought to or spoke of enlisting, not all were accepted. In May, Dr. J. D. Leffingwell of Braidentown sold his medical practice to William D. Hicks and left for Tampa to volunteer his services as a surgeon. He was back in town two weeks later and resumed his practice, not from his old office, but, the press reported, "friends and patients can find him at any time at either his residence, the drug store or the post office." With 65,000 volunteers mustered into service and 13 regiments assigned to duty in Florida, it was probably his age that kept him out of the service. In mid-September he took out an ad saying that he was leaving Braidentown to attend the New York Post-Graduate medical school.

In Sarasota, J.H. Gillespie wrote to his mother that since "they expect to put the cowhunters first into Cuba ... I may get to the front." While he identified with the pride of the cowhunter, Gillespie was a businessman. He did not enlist. One of the area's cowhunters, A.B. Edwards, did try, but was turned down because of bad eyesight. Not to be deterred, Edwards, later mayor of Sarasota, went to Cuba anyway, and obtained a civilian position with the Quartermaster's Department of the Army. In a later interview he recalled that when he went to Cuba he wore his cowhunter's clothes, including the leggings. He said, "When I went into the commander's office he looked at me from the soles of my feet to the top of

my head, but never said a word." Edwards spent two years there, part of the time assessing the need for cattle. On his return to Sarasota in the spring of 1900, he participated in the lucrative shipment of cattle to the cattle starved island.

Throughout the summer of 1898 reports of and from local participants in the Cuban war maintained a personal connection to events reported in the press. The reported death of M. Hans Wyatt pretty well ended the lighthearted aspect of the eagerness for local war news. Wyatt, who had opened his own abstract business in Braidentown in January, by June was among the first sailing from Tampa with the U. S. Army to Cuba. On July 14, the *Manatee River Journal* announced that three letters had been received in town, telling that young Hans had been killed during the battle for San Juan Hill. He had been with Captain Burns' Tampa Rifles, part of the U. S. 6th Infantry.

Two weeks later the paper thrilled local readers with the headline that "HANS WYATT IS NOT DEAD but liveth and writes that he never felt better in his life." A post card, dated July 7th, Santiago, Cuba, had finally reached his brother G.H. Wyatt. The same mail brought a letter dated July 8th to Mr. Willard, saying, "that he knew what war meant, having passed through the hottest of the battle of July 1st," in which "his regiment suffered so terribly and the man on the left next to him was killed." These letters "were written from the trenches, where he had been continuously for three days" while flags of truce flew in Santiago. The second letter was necessarily short as "it was written on an old envelope and sheet of

note paper which had been part of someone else's letter. It was then mailed in a secondhand envelope, reversed and sewed together. "

Wyatt's return to Braidentown was announced in the November 10th issue. He brought his final discharge papers with him, which mentioned him "as a soldier: character, excellent; cool and brave in action; thoroughly trustworthy; service, honest and faithful." M. Hans Wyatt later served two terms as Manatee County sheriff, from 1905 through 1913. For 20 years he represented Domino Citrus Association as a field agent. He was ready to celebrate his 84th birthday, when he died on October 21, 1955.

Off the Manatee County coast, efforts were being made to protect the coastal communities on two fronts - military and medical. Egmont and Mullet Keys, located at the mouth of Tampa Bay and west of Manatee County, were centers of much activity.

For a number of years, Egmont Key had served as a quarantine station for any ships coming into the harbor. Yellow fever was an ongoing threat and with the increase of naval activity came the increased risk of importing the disease. At the same time, Egmont was a strategically important island, and some of the activity observed there was not clearly described for the local press.

In late May Congressman Sparkman announced that the War Department, through the Lighthouse Board, had agreed to connect a telegraph cable from Egmont Key to Braidentown and then on to Tampa and the outside world. Expectation was that it would be shared by the State Board of Health. On June 9,

the *Journal* sang out "Hello Central! I want Egmont Key!" reporting that Braidentown people should be able to communicate with the island by the week's end. Lighthouse tender *Arbutus* laid cable to Shaw's Point on the Manatee River and Hote Reed had men stringing cable to Braidentown. The cable was indeed completed before the paper's next edition on June 16.

But not everyone was that eager to report all the news. When the *Terra Ceia* came into the Manatee River at the time the cable was being laid, in search of wood and water, her crew gave out no information. As she carried several reels of cable, however, the press surmised that she was helping to mine Tampa Bay. The steamer *Manatee* was also on the river with an excursion party of soldiers on leave. On the *Terra Ceia*'s next run up the river for wood, the press reported that she carried "a large number of mines and other paraphernalia for harbor defense." But the "persons employed at Egmont (remained) noncommittal as to what is being done on the island."

The *Journal* reported in mid-August that the *Terra Ceia* was under government charter and engaged in delivering shell and other material to Egmont Key to be used in the construction of fortifications and three Decker portable houses for use at Egmont's detention camp of the U.S. Marine Hospital. The newspaper turned critical, however, three weeks later. "The character of the Egmont Key quarantine station or detention camp is of a character that is exceedingly dangerous to this section. All vessels coming from Cuba or infected ports are forced to stop there, to discharge their cargoes and undergo a thorough fumigating and

period of detention. This work is no doubt thoroughly done and there is probably no danger from that source for Tampa, but for the Manatee River and other nearby points from which men have gone to the island to secure work, there is danger. The Red Cross ship *Clinton* arrived there and a gentleman whose home is in Braidentown spent two nights and a day on board the vessel, assisting in discharging the cargo. This same gentleman came to the river and spent Sunday with his family, returning Monday. Others who have been working on the island station say that persons returning from Cuba are not restrained from coming into contact with the large number of laborers engaged "in government work and we know these laborers go and come, to Tampa, to the Manatee River and elsewhere." The following week the paper reported that the island's management had corrected the condition.

Fear of disease was not without cause, for many Manatee County residents could well remember the yellow fever epidemic of the previous decade. At the end of August, after the war was officially over, J. H. Curry, Jr., returned home on 30-day leave from the First Florida Regiment. He was recuperating from a serious case "of disease" contracted in the camp at Fernandina. Not all the local soldiers were as lucky. Dr. E. S. Tyner, who went to Santiago in early August as a yellow fever expert, was struck with that disease soon after arrival and soon died. He had claimed to have already had it and was thought to be immune.

While the week-to-week press coverage was limited to the war activity in Cuba, some of Manatee County's residents

became more involved in war operations in the Philippines. Alexander Watson was too young to join his brother Will in the Cuban war effort, but two years later, while attending school in Nashville, wrote home that he had joined the Marines and was sailing for the Philippines. After some weeks on the island he became ward master at the U. S. Marine 3rd Reserve Hospital. When the Manila regiments were ordered to China to quell the Boxer Rebellion, Alex was one of four hospital staff chosen to go. The second hot day of the march from Tientsin to Peking with the U. S. 116th Artillery, they battled Chinese forces. As young Watson was reviving a wounded soldier with spirits of ammonia, he heard a curt command from a voice above him order, "Don't give that stuff to my men!" Looking up, he discovered his boyhood neighbor and friend, William Curry Harllee, now a Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. Belonging to different divisions, they did not meet again for three months, until returning to the Philippines. When Watson caught up with Lt. Harllee again, who should be with him but his brother Will Watson and Edgar Graham, the son of Judge E. M. Graham of Manatee. Ed Graham was chief clerk in General Humphries' commissary department.

That Marine Corps lieutenant went on to become Brig. General William C. Harllee, who "led the crusade to make marksmanship a part of Marine training for the nation's military" according to Strom Thurmond in the introduction to John Harllee's *The Marine from Manatee*.

Harllee's early years were not as outstanding, however. William was born in the town of Manatee. He attended the

Citadel Military Academy in South Carolina, but was a poor student. After failing to graduate, he taught school at Oak Hill, Florida (later Parrish), where he had to beat up the big boys to maintain discipline. Now that he knew what it was like from both sides of the teacher's desk, he applied for an appointment to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point and was admitted on June 19, 1897. Harlee spent most of the Spanish American War collecting demerits and was "honorably discharged for deficiencies in discipline" on July 30, 1899.

After his discharge from West Point, he persuaded Congressman Sparkman and U. S. Senator-elect James P. Taliaferro to put his name in for an appointment as a first lieutenant in one of the first ten regiments being formed for duty in the Philippines. The appointment never came and while visiting Washington, D.C., he learned from an officer that, with his past record, it never would. But at the Metropolitan Hotel he met his friend Geoffrey Reese Fowler of Texas, who was captain of the Second Texas

Regiment in the Spanish-American War. Fowler had just received his appointment as captain of the 33rd U.S. Volunteers, to be organized at San Antonio, Texas. Fowler asked Harlee to come along with him as First Sergeant of the Texans, also known as the 33rd Texas Volunteers. While in San Antonio, Harlee met Captain Lee Hall of the Texas Rangers, who taught him marksmanship - the start of his real career. But Harlee entered active service with the volunteers as a private, peeling potatoes.

Quickly promoted to sergeant to help drill the new Westerners, he rose to First Sergeant in Co. F under Captain Fowler. They sailed to Manila in October 1899, moved to Corregidor Island and missed the big battle at San Fabian that included the rest of the regiment. Harlee's unit was sent here and there on scouting expeditions until the battle of Mangataren on November 23rd. That Thanksgiving capture gave them the main supply base and fourteen artillery pieces destined for General Aljandrino's army. This was followed by the battle of San Miguel in which the Americans captured fifteen pieces of artillery. They returned to San Francisco in December, 1899.

Harlee joined the U.S. Marine Corps and passed his exam for 2nd Lieutenant on February 2, 1900. Commissioned February 17, his pay was \$1400 per year. Had he remained at West Point, he would not have been commissioned until June of 1901. Harlee went on to fight the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Cuban pacification of 1906, saw action at Vera Cruz in 1914, then in Haiti and Santo Domingo. He oversaw construction of fourteen rifle ranges for the U. S. Navy during World War I, and rose in rank to Lt. Colonel.

Hans Wyatt was not the only Spanish - American War veteran to become sheriff of Manatee County. During the 1928 four-way race for sheriff, James P. Davidson placed an ad in the *Bradenton Herald*, "North Carolinian by birth, Floridian by choice (twenty years in Manatee County), a Presbyterian by Faith, a Democrat by principle, a Prohibitionist by conviction, a Spanish-American War veteran by voluntary enlistment, a farmer and

contractor by profession and will be the next sheriff of Manatee County by the votes of the law abiding element of Manatee County."

The ad continued: "endorsed by a majority of ministers, a large majority of the women voters and other outstanding leaders of Manatee County who have observed the recent desperate effort to surrender this county to a lawless element." He was, indeed, elected and it turned out to be a peaceful four-year term. He was born in 1878, lived in Statesville, North Carolina and presumably served in the North Carolina First Volunteer Regiment during the Spanish-American War under the command of Col. Joseph F. Ammfield. This unit included the Statesville Volunteers. The North Carolina First Regiment was to be sent directly to Tampa for embarkation to Cuba but was diverted to Jacksonville, still badly trained and miserably equipped, there to join General Fitzhugh Lee's 7th Army Corps on May 22, 1898.

After desertions, dysentery, typhoid fever and lack of everything they were transported in early December to Savannah, Georgia, where they boarded a transport to Mariana, Cuba, for garrison duty. Their four month stint was uneventful and they returned to Ft. Pulaski, near Savannah, in March 1899.

Davidson then joined Company M of the 46th Infantry of the U.S. Volunteers and after training at the Presidio, San Francisco, was sent to the Philippines. The 46th served at Manila, Siland, Indan in the Cavite Province and Luzon before being sent home aboard the U.S. Army transport *Sheridan*, an old rust-bucket. The tub took two months to make the

crossing and delivered a lot of seasick soldiers first to Hawaii and then on to San Francisco during March and April 1901. The 46th was mustered out of service at the Presidio on May 31, 1901. Davidson must then have returned to North Carolina for he married Claudia Oaks from that state. They came to Palmetto in Manatee County around 1909. His administration as sheriff, 1929 through 1932, was described as "singularly free from the spectacular."

While the Spanish-American War was one of the shorter conflagrations in which the United States has been involved, it left its mark on the lightly populated Manatee County. Some joined the fray and traveled to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; others prepared to defend their towns while they remained at home. Cattlemen and farmers had the opportunity to gain some short term profits feeding hungry soldiers and starving Cubans. For some, the experience became a proven patriotic steppingstone to later public office.

ENDNOTE

"The Spanish-American War South of Tampa Bay," was presented in Tampa, Florida on May 29, 1998 by the authors to the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society.