



Florida was wilder than wild West

Written by the late Carl Adams, a historian who lived in Auburndale. This article is replicated with the permission of his widow, Jewell Adams, who currently resides in Lakeland, FL.

I have often been asked how similar was Florida, during the late 1800's, to the old West. In comparison, I sometimes think that Florida was the worst of the two. Tombstone, Ariz. Couldn't have been much worse than Bradford County, where the town of Starke is located.

Of the nine sheriffs who served from 1885 until 1912, five of them were murdered while on duty and another one died by a bullet fired by either himself or persons unknown.

Also during this time, three deputy sheriffs, a town marshal and an acting night marshal were all killed in the line of duty.

One of the amazing things was that from 1885 to 1891, three out of four sheriffs were killed after serving only one or two years of their term. It seems that this hard-luck streak, which could furnish enough material for a TV show for years, began when George Washington Epperson of Lake Butler took office Jan. 5, 1886. He was the eighth sheriff elected to office in Bradford County.

Sheriff Epperson was known as a good horseman and a good shot. He proved to be a brave and honest man, who like all sheriffs at the time, did most of the work himself. Sheriffs seldom asked a deputy to do what they thought was a dangerous job. Epperson was killed while trying to arrest a man who was considered dangerous and was holed up in Valdosta, Ga.

When word reached Bradford County of his death, his son Henry was appointed to finish out his father's term, which he did, keeping law and order in the same way his father had done. Then in 1888, he was elected to a full term of office. A few months later; a gambler and desperado from south Florida by the name of Frank Foster killed him while he was trying to arrest him. Foster rode away and there is no information as to whether he was ever captured or not.

After the death of Henry Epperson, a city marshal by the name of D.L. (Levy) Alvarez was appointed to fill out Henry's term. Soon after his appointment he was killed in a shootout between a posse, which he had formed, and the notorious and dreaded desperado, Harmon Murray.

The story goes that Murray, being trapped at a friend's house by the posse, was desperately trying to shoot his way out. He was known to be a crack shot with a Winchester and had already killed twelve men. Alvarez made the mistake of wearing a white shirt on this moonlit night. He was an easy target for Murray, who shot his way out of the friend's house and escaped to rob and murder until his own personal Brutus, a supposed friend, did him in.

After the third sheriff was killed in six years, things quieted down some. The saloons and other businesses in the small towns were well lit at night with kerosene lamps that usually got shot out by the Florida cowboys when they came to town, if they were near enough to one to hit

it; but most of them were just bad to drink and fight. They were rough, but they were not gunmen.

Then in 1893, Everett Johns, the father of one of our governors, was elected to take over the job of sheriff of Bradford County. F.S. Crews had filled the vacancy when Alvarez had been killed, but he hadn't wanted the job in the first place. John's term was to be for just one year. Then a hot and dangerous political battle began at the next election between Johns and Joe Bennett, who defeated Johns. The battle left a lot of bad blood between the two parties.

Johns was afraid for his family, so he moved to Nassau County and took a deputy sheriff job there. Johns would ride his horse over to Lake Butler one way, but always came back another. One day a fellow came to deputy Johns with a fake warrant for the arrest of a man who had stolen a large net. Johns and the man left out together and the next day, deputy Johns' body was found in his buggy with a bullet hole in his head. The stranger was gone and never found.

Two years after the death of Johns, his successor for the Bradford County sheriff's job, Joe Bennett, of Lawtey, was found dead of gunshot wounds under mysterious circumstances at his home in Starke. The records say that foul play was suspected.

After the death of Sheriff Bennett, J.N. Langford of Lake Butler was appointed to fill out the term of Bennett and was elected to a full term in 1910, but after serving 10 months of his term' he was killed in a hotel in Jacksonville while arguing with a friend.

In addition to the six sheriffs that had met violent deaths, at least two deputies of this period died with their boots on in the line of duty.

Henry O. Richard was killed in 1903 in Lawtey where he was trying to make an arrest. Deputy Mallie Jones of Starke left Bradford County and went to Jacksonville to work as a deputy and was killed in the line of duty there. In 1899, Lake Butler's deputy Audry Kile was fatally shot in the back with four bullets there by an unknown party, while attempting to make an arrest. Marshal Jeff Jones went to a disturbance at the J.D. Crabbs saloon on Call Street and was fatally wounded, but the records do not show by whom he was shot.

Yes, these were the bad times. The state of Florida was beginning to grow. Large cattle ranches began to come into the county bringing with them the tough and rowdy men it took to build an empire out of the wilderness.

Also the lumber and turpentine companies had the toughs.

Along with them came the special breed that would enforce law and order. In Bradford County alone, during this period of 27 years, six sheriffs, two deputies, and three city marshals would all die with their boots on.

Florida, like the West, was cattle country. The opportunity for work and advancement was here for the taking, and though those wild and wooly days have gone, they left many stories that have been told around the campfires at night.
