Early Miami Through the Eyes of Youth

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Introduction
The following account of early Miami is composed of an edited face to face interview with Ethel Weatherly Sherman who came to Miami as a child of ten in 1896, and an unsigned, undated manuscript undoubtedly written by her perhaps to be used for a talk or paper by her. The audiotaped interview was done by Valerie Fisher Lassman, Ph.D., on July 25, 1978, and transcribed by this author. Present at the interview was Hal Mordaunt, Jr., Sherman’s son by her previous marriage to Hal Mordaunt, Sr. Apparently he was sitting a distance from the microphone so that often I was unable to perceive what he was saying on the audiotape. To indicate this, I have left a short blank line followed by [H. Jr.]. A copy of the undated manuscript was given to me by Christopher Eck, Administrator of the Broward County Historical Commission, in August 2001, when he was Director of the Office of Historic Preservation, Miami-Dade County. Copies of both of these sources may be found in the archives of the Historical Museum of Southern Florida. I have quoted from each of these sources material that is not easily available; this material focuses on day to day events as seen through the eyes of a youth. Further, I have deleted interjections, and repetitious expressions, and I have included in brackets and the endnotes, missing words, corrections and supplemental information. Although quotation marks do not appear, the whole of this narrative is contained within a quotation; I have left misspellings, as well as lack of capitalizations and punctuations in the narrative which follows.
Mama, small sister Edna and I arrived in Miami, from Kissimmee in the Fall 1896 [Miami was incorporated a few months earlier]. To get here we had to go to Palatka to change trains then lay over and spend a night in New Smyrna, then on to Miami.

When we came from the train it really looked hopeless—no depot, no paved streets, shacks and shanties lined the rocky road [now Flagler Street]. We walked over to the site of the 2 tents my father [Capt. William Henry Weatherly] had provided for us. Mama was disgusted and heartsick—we had left a lovely little home in Kissimmee, with nice flower & vegetable gardens, a cow & lots of room, beautiful old oak trees, not far from the lake—and to come to this awful camp, our new “home” was a shock. If our home in Kissimmee had not been sold, I’m sure mama would have returned to it the next day. Our tents were situated on the NE corner of what is now East Flagler St. and NE 1st Avenue, under huge old oak trees, surrounded by a thicket of wild growth, papayas—palmettos & vines, etc. Twelfth St. [today’s Flagler Street] had not been paved, it was a rough tangle of rocks and roots—but there were a lot of people living along both sides in tents & Shacks (built mostly of scrap lumber mostly from the Royal Palm Hotel which was under construction a few blocks away). Each shack had its own water pump, and sometimes the pumps brought up water thick with lime, and a terrible taste.

Our furniture consisted of a cot for each of us, a few Kitchen chairs, a Kitchen table and a 2-burner Kerosene oil stove and other camping inconveniences. Life was really rough—the mosquitoes devoured us day & night—the only way you could sit out doors afternoon & at night was by huddling in the smoke over a tub of smudge [made of] dried coconut hulls sprinkled with “mosquito powder” [possibly pyrethrum] we bought from the Townley Bros. little drug store across the street, and rags. The Townley brothers, John, Tom & Vernon also came from Kissimmee as did John & Ev Sewell. The Sewells opened the first shoe store here in the Miami Hotel a small wooden bldg. which was situated on Avenue D (now Miami Avenue) not far from the [Miami] river. The hotel burned, [December 25, 1899] when it was only a few years old, in a big fire that destroyed several small businesses in the vicinity.

We’d been living in tents for months and months and months before we got into the house because there was no other place to live. My father had these tents built for us and after the houses were built [the
Flagler cottages along today’s southeast first and second streets], of course, they let us move into one of the houses. We had two tents, both of them together were not as large as this patio. Just ordinary like soldiers tents but he did have wooden floors in them and they had what they called a fly over ‘em—one big sheet of canvas to keep the hot sun from getting on the roof of the tent itself, you know. Just with screening all around. It was just the roughest rawest kind of living.

We were capsized when we were living in the tent. I went out just for the fun of sailing. I had never been on a boat and I know my mother hadn’t and probably papa either. This Mr. [A. L.] Gravelle that was a friend of his, he was a carpenter on the Royal Palm, had a little sailboat so he took us out sailing and we capsized and were not rescued until the following day. We were out there twenty-two hours. We just clung to that boat—it was under water. You know the boat would have a curve like this, it was on its side. So my mother and father, my mother holding my little baby sister, we were all just crowded together on that rounded part of the boat that was...well, we were still in water up to our necks, the boat was so far under water. And there we...well, we couldn’t do anything. I remember seeing the sun go down and I’ll never forget that as long as I live. The only outline of Miami that we could see was the framework of the Royal Palm Hotel. It was up about two stories it wasn’t even anywhere near finished. But luckily my mother
had a brother [Charles Wynne] living in Miami, young fellow, he was about eighteen years old, and when we didn't get home that night, he was alarmed and began telling everybody Weatherly and his family didn't get back from this sailing trip and he knew where we were supposed to go across the Bay to see if we could find shells on the beach. By the next day people were alarmed enough to began getting in what boats there were. There were only probably five or six boats, not very many. And one of them belonged to a Mr. [Wesley M.] Featherly as luck would have it. So we were Weatherlys being rescued by Featherly. Featherly was the owner and editor of the old *Miami Metropolis*. I've got the newspaper with that account in it. It was Charlie, Charlie Wynne, got so frightened and worried. Somebody suggested that if anybody has binoculars, get up as high as you can go on the framework of the Royal Palm and see if you can find them out there in the Bay somewhere. Somebody said well Mr. [A. L.] Knowlton had this surveyor's instrument, you know the telescope. Mr. Knowlton plotted the layout of Miami. So they got hold of Mr. Knowlton, he was a very old man even at that time. Had a long white beard; I'll never forget it. And they got Mr. Knowlton up there and with that instrument he spotted us out there. He said it looked like just coconuts out there because we were in the water up to our necks. But he said go there and see if that's what it is. So it happened it was all of us perched on that capsized boat. He located us with that instrument and sent the Featherly boat out there after us. But it was very windy and chilly, I don't remember exactly what date it was and what month but it's in the newspaper. They had to send a rowboat over to pick us up. The Featherly boat was named *The Ethel Pearl*, I think. But they sent the rowboat out and picked us up and took us on there [on board] and then they took us back to shore and a lot of people were living on houseboats at that time. And they were anchored along just little makeshift homemade docks that ran out from the shore.

There was a family named [N. D.] Coates, I think some of them are still around, it was a large family. The Coates people invited us to come aboard their houseboat because my mother was in terrible condition. She had been badly hurt in sitting astride this overturned boat. She had to sit astride of it and hold Edna in her arms, so the movement of the boat wore off the flesh of her ankles right down to the bone. It took her a long time before she was able to get around. Dr. [James M.] Jackson
[the new city's first physician] took care of her, got her back and straightened out again. But, anyway the Coates kept us there on their houseboat for several days, maybe a week and just made everything wonderful for us. That’s one thing at that time everybody was neighborly and they did everything they could for each other, you know.

I’ve got pictures of Hal’s father, [Hal Mordaunt, Sr.] he was an actor, a very handsome wonderful looking man. He had I guess the first plays ever presented in Miami. He was a professional actor and later I went on the road with him. He was born in San Diego.

He had recruited a group of amateur actors here. There was Charlie Dillon and Redmond Gautier, that was Bunn’s [R. B.] father and Charlie Dillon who was the son of Captain [G. W.] Dillon, the captain on that Key West boat, and Cecil Watson and [Gustav] Von Moser, the German who was such a character here in Miami and oh I don’t know, there were eight or ten of us. Hal and my mother made the scenery, stitched it together and Hal painted it. If it was a forest scene, a living room scene, whatever, and then these plays were put on in the school auditorium, just a little bitty stage. What school was that? It wasn’t the high school—the Central Grammar School. Where the Federal Building is [on today’s Northeast First Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets]. This was a wooden building, just a big old wooden frame building. We went to school there and later on and that’s where Hal’s father’s company had come to Miami to put on some plays, Gagnon Pollack Stock Company (?). That was the first thing the Picketts and the Gagnons, that put on the first plays here then Hal put on these amateur plays where he had all these young amateurs, Priscella Budge and all the kids. He taught them how to dance and he put on these plays—later on we put on plays with two or three acts in them. I was in an amateur play with Von Moser and Cecil Watson and all these people and Hal’s company was here, they were to use that theater and they were delayed one day because we had engaged that night for our show. So Hal’s father was sitting in the audience with the rest of his company and watching these amateurs play. So he came back stage and introduced himself to me and that’s how I met your father. And I went home—he stayed and took me home from the play. And he took me to his home which was also my home, he had rented a room in mama’s house. Across from the San Carlos Hotel.
In clearing land for [the] grounds of [the] Royal Palm Hotel, a large Indian Mound had to be removed—Papa was in charge of a crew of laborers who began at the eastern base and gradually brought it down. They found a great many skeletons, lots of items which may have belonged to soldiers stationed at Ft. Dallas such as handmade metal canteens, odds and ends of pottery jars—glass beads and other objects. We had several of these but over the years have lost all except some blue & white glass beads and a handmade flattened gold earring found in a grave occupied by a small skeleton. This mound no doubt had been started many years before even the Brickells settled on the point across the river as papa found among bones of a skeleton near the bottom of the mound a beautiful gold crucifix, evidently belonging to a Catholic priest. He presented this wonderful find to Mr. J. A. McDonald who was in charge of all of the Flagler development, a contractor who supervised [the] building of [the] Royal Palm. Other skeletons found higher up in layers near [the] top of the mound were removed and [the] bones deposited in barrels, the Skulls ranged up on boards placed on [the] top of barrels. After all bones were removed and placed in barrels, they were buried in a deep sink-hole not far away. This was a natural deep pit, with a large wild fig tree growing tall with its top many feet above the

Clearing the grounds for the Royal Palm Hotel, March 1896. Miami River, Brickell Point and the Brickell family home are in the background. HASF 62-24-185.
rim. The pit was gradually filled and [the] ground leveled. As near as I can recall, this pit was located about what is now SE Second Street & Second Avenue. The Watson [John W. Watson ] home in later years was built on this spot.6 The gold earring and beads mentioned are now deposited in the Loxahatchee Historical Museum, 805 North US 1, Jupiter, Florida.

I was at the opening [of the Royal Palm Hotel] and it was a beautiful event [January 17, 1897]. They had a wonderful Italian orchestra. The hotel itself was just magnificent, it was beautifully carpeted and furnished with handsome wicker furnishings and big mirrors everywhere and the most beautiful ballroom. I was just a kid, I guess I was ten years old then. It was on the river side of the hotel but before we got to that ballroom we went through a big rotunda and the place for the orchestra and then there was the dance floor. And at this opening everybody in Miami was invited. They were very gracious and nice. The manager was—his last name was on the tip of my tongue—it’ll come to me [Henry W. Merrill]. But anyway they just issued a blank invitation to all the—everybody come. And there was more scurrying around for people trying to buy material, to buy a new dress, to wear to this thing, I remember mine quite well, it was a very stiff blue organdy and I’ll never forget when I sat down, it was all just sticking to me, wrinkled up, and you know how some cloth will just crinkle up and just stay like that. But everybody got new clothes, new shoes, and all got fixed up for this thing and it was the first orchestra I think I’d ever heard in my life and I was completely fascinated like all the children were. And they let the children ride in the elevators, the beautiful hallways with all these elevators running up. They had young women operating the elevators and they were so nice to us. I guess they all had their orders to take these poor little crackers and give ‘em a good time. But they’d run the elevators up and down and let us ride them and we’d go in these beautiful rooms where all the mirrors were and beautiful furniture that we’d never seen before.7

What kind of things did your mother used to do for you at home? Everything, sewed, cooked, kept house—just did everything except the laundry. What kind of things did she like to cook? Everything southerners like. We had ham and bacon, plenty of eggs, cereals, vegetables—turnip greens, collard greens, corn—just everything that southerners like. Did you have a little garden in the back? Oh no,
there was no room for the garden because the Flagler houses were built back to back around the street so there was not much space. I don't remember anybody having a garden.

How did you get your dairy products and your groceries? Well, there were two grocery stores, little things. I think the first one was operated by a Mr. Brady, E. L. Brady, who moved here from Titusville and J. E. Lummus—and later on T. N. Gautier. There were three just general like old country stores, they had everything, you know, but pretty good supplies.

Were they delivered to your house? Oh yes, in those days Mr. Lummus came to the back door to take my mother's kitchen order and Bradys never did that. Mr. Lummus, I think, came after Brady and he had to build up business. So they'd come around—I can remember seeing Mr. Lummus with his little book jotting down the things mama wanted. And in those days you bought a barrel of flour and a great big strip of bacon, just everything in big quantities. And it was a long time before we had ice. A man named L. C. Oliver had a little ice factory up about where Sixth Street—it was Sixth Street then, I believe, it stayed Sixth [the only street in Miami that retained its original number name after the new system of numbering and name streets was adopted in 1920].

The streets, of course, were just this coral rock just pounded up and the streets were just snow white, they'd put your eyes out. And they were pounded down. They put down coarse rock first then the fine rock and then the colored workers would string out across the street with their tamps [an instrument for packing dirt or sand in a hole] and sing these beautiful Negro spirituals and they tamped [and] they kept time. People all over town, the few lawyers that were here like Mr. [H.F.] Atkinson, Bob [R.H.] Seymour and Robert [R.] Taylor and people like that, they kinda just — it was like going to a show. Just stand there and watch these men work and hear them singing. It was really wonderful. But of course I was so young, it was a wonderful experience for me. I was a roamer, I was everywhere, I went all over town. I had a little bicycle and as the streets were paved and there was some place to go I went there I wanted to see what it was.

What do you recall about the Seminoles in particular? The only thing I remember about them was their costuming, really, and their shirts and the beautiful turbans. They wore these turbans that they made and
the—you’ve seen the Indian women, the women’s clothes. They used to put so much work on those beautiful shirts it was just amazing the colors that could combine. And the men, of course, the shirts came down to their knees, and they were barefoot, they didn’t wear shoes or socks or anything like that, they just had real tough soles with their feet. But those costumes were wonderful. They used to have these long canoes that were hollowed out of big trees, big pine trees. And they poled them, they didn’t have oars. The man would stand in the stern of the boat and put the pole down and push it, push the boat ahead. I remember seeing those, a great many of them especially around the Brickell Point where they used to do a lot of trading [at the Brickell family’s trading post]. It was across the river from the main part of Miami.¹⁰

Did you ever see the Indians come into town much for any reason? Oh, yes, they came in all the time. You could hardly go out on the street, especially down on the river across from Brickells but what you’d see them. Oh, it wasn’t a rare sight at all. They were friendly. There was a family here named Girtman, they had a little grocery store [Girtman Brothers: Grover C. and James D.] on Twelfth Street between the railroad and Avenue D. and the Indians used to do a lot of trading there. You couldn’t go into the Girtman grocery, hardly, without seeing Indians. They were just a fixture in that store and great friends of the Girtman family. They had a daughter named Rosebud, Rosebud Girtman, and—I’ve forgotten the names of the males in the family, there were several that comprised the grocery business.¹¹

During the Spanish American war everybody kept boarders and on 13th Street, in the first Flagler house that we lived in when I was a child, we lived next door to Burdines and all the houses were built with nice big attics. When there was a chance to rent a room the family moved into the attic and rented that room. Burdines did, we did, the Hahns, everybody did it.

A little while ago we were talking about what Miami was like during the Spanish American War. It was just a quiet little town and the soldiers were camped up on the Bay. They were orderly, they behaved themselves. We knew people in one of the Texas regiments we were quite friendly with. And I don’t know how many regiments there were but there were several because they occupied a lot of ground there. It must have been several blocks. They were here, I think, on account of
being close to Cuba—they might have to go over there anytime, you know. They used to drill in the streets—it was like a show for the people, they enjoyed it. The town, itself, was just a nice quiet town, everybody was behaving themselves. Everybody knew everybody else we were all friendly. There were stores cropping up and businesses going here and there. The town was growing very fast.12

I went to the East Florida Seminary in Gainesville and learned stenography, learned shorthand and typing. And I went to work for this old friend, Bob Seymour, who was from Kissimmee, and a lawyer named Atkinson and for the whole big sum of three dollars a week. And I wasn’t any more of a stenographer than one of these puppies around here. But I could after a fashion write what they told me to write, but I was far from a good stenographer. Anyway the Brickells were clients of Seymour and Atkinson, the law firm. And I often had to take papers over for Mrs. [Mary] Brickell to sign. Mr. Seymour had a stable with a stable, Correll’s, Adam Correll’s Stable. They would rent a horse and a little buggy, a little single-seater buggy, and I’d go over there and get a horse and buggy and drive across the little old wooden bridge to the Brickell’s house.13 There was just this little old narrow paved road that the bridge joined up with, and cause that was the only way you could get across except with a boat. When Mr. Seymour had papers for Mrs. Brickell or some of the family to sign why they would send me over there with them.

You know as I think of Mrs. Brickell she looked to me more like some pictures that you see of Queen Victoria. Really? Yes, that type. She was English and a very nice person. And there were two or three sons, there was Charles and William, I remember, and there was Edith, I think she was the oldest and Belle and Maude was the youngest. One of them was killed I think after the 1926 storm [September 12, 1924]. She was electrocuted in her own garden walking around and she ran

Mary Bulmer Brickell, ca. 1870. HASF, Stan Cooper Collection, 1990-521-1.
into a live wire—that was Belle [Alice]. Miss Edith was really the business manager for the Brickells. As they grew older and didn't want to have anything with anything but just trying to rest, you know. But anyway, that's how I knew Mrs. Brickell and I admit if there was any of them in the room she'd introduce me to them. So I met a good many of them. Do you recall Mr. Brickell personally? No. I just remember how he looked. I met him but that's all.

How was their house? Well it was like pictures that you see of the old Victorian houses full of bric-a-brac and beautiful old furniture. And, as I recall, I never saw Mrs.[Mary ] Brickell standing. I don't know whether she could walk or not because she was always sitting in the big easy chair. She was always nice to me, they always had crackers and cookies and tea. So I had quite a little visit there while I was waiting for her to read and sign the papers and everything like that. And I used to wander around the place. I saw a good deal of it. They had a family graveyard in the ground and I don't remember who was in it but I know it was just a family graveyard. I think the mausoleum is still there. They may have built the mausoleum on the spot where these people are buried, but at that time I know they were just buried, you could see the headstones. I never examined them 'cause I didn't want to get called down about prowling around other people's property.
I knew Mrs. Tuttle; I used to steal pansies from her pansy bed and I got scolded many a time. They had a pansy bed along in back of the old building, the Fort Dallas barracks. You’ve seen pictures of that haven’t you? Yes. She had this beautiful pansy bed and it was easy to get to because it wasn’t too—I’m getting my cart before the horse. There was a street that ran down into the Fort Dallas property and her home was off to the left and all the rest of it was just palm trees and flowers and shrubs—a beautiful landscaped place. And she had these flower beds all over the place but the pansy bed was my favorite because it was easiest to get to. ‘Cause I could come in across the railroad [Florida East Coast Railway]—there was a railroad spur that went down behind our houses and to the Royal Palm. East and West into the Royal Palm—right into the Royal Palm building to unload groceries and supplies and everything for the hotel. So all you had to do was cross that railroad track and go in and there you were in Mrs. Tuttle’s property. And she had all these beautiful flower beds everywhere but the pansies were my favorite and I used to steal pansies. Once in a while she’d catch me—she’d just yell at me, “Be careful don’t get too many.” But she was nice, she was a wonderful person, just as nice, everybody loved her. When she was very sick, in fact when she died, there were no professional nurses in Miami so people volunteered. There may have been one or two that knew a little about nursing but no real professionals. And Aunt Edith was one of the people that volunteered to nurse Mrs. Tuttle during her illness. So in that way we got into the house quite often, going over with Aunt Edith to take her something. The house that Mrs. Tuttle lived in was just a typical, old Bahamian, stone house with a concrete corridor running in front of it. And it was just a plain, big, old comfortable house. ‘Course she brought all her beautiful furniture from the home in Cleveland, I believe it was, Cleveland, Ohio.\textsuperscript{15}

Do you recall Dr. [James M.] Jackson? Very, very well. He was one of the most wonderful men that ever lived. And he was so good to everybody. You know there were people that were unable to pay but it didn’t make a bit of difference to Dr. Jackson. You got his best care and you never got a bill. He was just one of the most wonderful people that ever lived. He was a nice looking man. He was blond and blue-eyed and I remember exactly his features and his wife, his
lovely wife—he married her, a Gainesville girl [Bronson, FL], her name was Ethel Barco and she and my mother were great friends. Did he have any children? Let’s see, Ethel Jackson and Helen Jackson, two daughters he never had a son. It was Ethel Jackson that the little tub was painted for, you know that I told you about. There was no plumbing in Miami at that time and when Mrs. Jackson’s first child, Helen [Ethel was the first born] Jackson, was getting ready to be born, they couldn’t get a suitable baby bathtub for her. So Frank T. Budge had this big hardware store [on today’s East Flagler Street and North Miami Avenue]—it was really a big business ‘cause everybody was building something. Mrs. Jackson bought a big oval dishpan and she and my mother enameled it with white enamel. That was that baby’s, Ethel Jackson’s bathtub. Other doctors soon came to Miami—Dr. [R. H.] Huddleston, from Kissimmee, Dr. Peter [Thomas] Skaggs, Dr. [Samuel Mills] Fowler, his wife [Dr. Corrie Harriet Rogers Fowler] also a doctor, and their 3 children,—Frank, Fay [who as Fay Cunningham served many years as Secretary of Miami Pioneers] and Corrie who married Harry Tuttle, son of Mrs. Julia D. Tuttle The 2 doctors Fowler were Julia Tuttle’s doctors during her last illness.
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Notes

1. Unsigned manuscript of Ethel Weatherly Sherman, 1.
2. Ibid., 2–3.
7. Manuscript of the Lassman interview, 6-8.
8. Lassman interview, 21-23. This portion of the narrative contains, somewhat awkwardly, a series of questions and answers, which, however, provide valuable information on the nascent city.
9. Ibid., 8.
11. Ibid., 26
12. Ibid., 26-27. Miami, a town of perhaps 1,200, was host to more than 7,000 troops from June 1898, to early September of the same year. They brought with them a fearful epidemic of typhoid fever with twenty-four deaths among the troops. In addition there was a concomitant measles epidemic that spread to the civilian community and at least two deaths. Because of her youth, Ethel Weatherly Sherman was eleven years old in 1898, and because The Miami Metropolis editor minimized the extent of the sickness, she probably didn’t realize the calamitous effects among the troops and civilians. Ethel Weatherly Sherman also failed to recall the tension and occasional incidents of violence on the part of the troops. William M. Straight, “Camp Miami, 1898,” The Journal of the Florida Medical Association, 74: No. 4, 504-513, July 1987.
13. The first bridge over the Miami River was a wooden bridge that opened for traffic on December 8, 1896. It crossed the river at the foot of Avenue G [today’s SW 2nd Avenue]. It was in use until after 1903 when an iron bridge at Avenue D [today’s Miami Avenue] opened.
14. The Brickell mausoleum was built thirty yards southwest of the family graveyard located near the swimming pool at today’s Sheraton Biscayne Bay Hotel at 495 Brickell Avenue by the Thurmon
Monument Company in 1924. Subsequently, the burials in the graveyard were transferred to the mausoleum. Beginning August 8, 1924, Brickell burials were directly into the mausoleum. However, on August 30, 1951, the Brickell mausoleum was emptied and the bodies were transferred to the Woodlawn Park Cemetery, North. Ann McFadden, *Woodlawn Park North*, Vol. I, (Privately printed, Miami, 2000), 113-114.

Manuscript of the Lassman interview, 13-14. Mrs. Tuttle’s house was one of two stone buildings standing on the north bank of the Miami River built by William English as his manor house in late 1848. It stood parallel to the north bank of the river and just west of the slave quarters building, the other stone structure, which is now preserved in Lummus Park and known as the William English Slave Plantation House/Fort Dallas.

Manuscript of the Lassman interview, 9.

Unsigned manuscript of Ethel Weatherly Sherman, 6. Sherman’s account ends abruptly here. The value of this incomplete essay lies, of course, in the plethora of information found in it. Despite its youthfulness, today’s Greater Miami has relatively few pioneer remaining thus making the Weatherly Sherman essay even more important.
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