

Florida and the West Indies¹

Prof. F. A. Ober

Hitherto we have been in pursuit of information pure and simple; I now claim the privilege of a relaxation, and ask you to paddle off with me to the hunter's fairyland, to the elysium of reminiscences.

Let us go camping out. You know how it is in camping out; a man divests himself of every artificial surrounding that makes life enjoyable and then sets out to enjoy it.

Indian River, a vast salt-water lagoon, is the paradise of the camper-out. The eddies of the Gulf Stream, in ages past, have thrown upon Florida's eastern shore such an accumulation of broken shells and coquina that the mouths of the Southern rivers have been closed, and their waters thrown back on the country, uniting laterally and forming extensive lagoons.

Indian River, 120 miles in length, connects with another system, the Mosquito Lagoon and Matanzas, giving altogether over 300 miles of protected water travel within the sound of the surf beat of the ocean.

All the game in Florida, bear, deer, turkeys, panthers, were once here in the greatest abundance. In the swamps along its borders were vast heronries, where, gathered by hundreds, were beautiful egrets and snowy herons with downy, filamentous plumes. Pelicans breed here by thousands, oysters are abundant, and on the sea-beach, in June, scarcely a night passes that we cannot turn over an immense turtle's nest containing half a hundred eggs. In this lagoon also is captured the bulky sea-cow, or manatee, sometimes 8 feet in length, and weighing 500 or 600 pounds.

Far down in the everglades, in the little-known interior of Florida, surrounded by impenetrable swamps and gloomy forest, lies the mysterious lake of the South, the vast Okeechobee.



JOE BURGESS

Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaia ajaja*), like many other species of wading birds, were decimated by plume hunters around the turn of the 20th Century. They have recovered due to protective legislation, but have not reached the populations densities recorded by Ober and others during the late 19th Century.



JOE WASILEWSKI

American Alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) became endangered throughout Florida and much of the southeastern United States as a consequence of legal hunting and, more recently, poaching. Hides and meat were valuable commodities. Alligators have benefited from legal protection and their conservation status has been upgraded from endangered to threatened. The species is now abundant in many areas, although habitat loss and changes in water management continue to threaten them, as well as many other species in Florida.

At the commencement of the present century this lake was a little known as in the time of De Soto; and even 50 years ago, at the beginning of the Seminole war, every thing about it partook of the vagueness, and was tinged with the romance, that such an unexplored region, surrounded by Indians alleged to be hostile, was likely to create. Such it was even in 1874, when I organized my expedition to explore it. We were a month absent on this exploration, and my boat was the first to float upon its waters in nearly 30 years. We succeeded in dispelling the halo of exaggeration that surrounded the lake, and gave to the world a truthful account of its resources.

No creek or river formed the outlet of this vast body of water; the accumulated drainage of thousands of square miles of territory slowly percolated through the everglades by countless channels. Since my visit to Okeechobee, a company of capitalists has effected its partial drainage and added a vast area of cultivable land to Florida's territory. The only sections not in swamp or under water were covered with huge "India-rubber" trees, delicately foliaged box, and sweet-scented bay, their trunks covered with gorgeous epiphytes with flaming blossoms, and their branches, draped in Spanish moss, the roosting-place of vultures and turkey-buzzards.

In the southern portion of the peninsula—around Lake Okeechobee and near the northern keys—reside the few

¹ Excerpted from the 1886 *Journal of the American Geographical Society*, volume 18.

Seminoles left in Florida by the treaty of 1842—between two and three hundred only in number; and here they lead a peaceful life, cultivating their fields, and hunting.

It was while among the Seminoles, in 1872 and 1874, that I enjoyed my best sport hunting the alligator. All are, of course, sufficiently familiar with this saurian not to need a further description from me. By thousands and thousands the guileless alligator of tender years has been ruthlessly torn from the maternal breast and sent adrift upon the frozen North; hence, the alligator in a menagerie is as familiar as the ubiquitous monkey.

Even to-day, after having been the sport of tourists for years, they may be shot on the St. John's; though the best hunting is to be found in secluded creeks and bayous.

Though the alligator attains sometimes a length of 12 or 14 feet, he is more commonly found at 8 or 10. His jaw is always one fourth his entire length, and one 12 feet long displays an open countenance a yard wide. The teeth work up well into ivory ornaments, and the skin, when properly tanned, makes the most

durable of leather. Some hunting boots I had made from a pair of nine-footers lasted me five years' wear and tear by flood and field. The alligator's vulnerable spots are the eye, ear and just abaft the fore-leg. The rifle is the best weapon, but I have shot several dozen with a shot-gun and some even with a small revolver.

The alligator is daintily-choice in his food, preferring a dog to the piney-woods hog, and a juicy, well-developed negro to either. The bull alligators have a tremendous roar, which shakes the forest when they indulge in a concert. I once found them so numerous, in the Indian country, that we gave over shooting and took to harpooning them; a certain hunt by moonlight lingers in memory yet through a dozen intervening years.

One hundred years ago, when that quaint old philosopher and botanist, Bartram, sailed up the St. John's in his Indian canoe, the river was without a settlement its entire length, and the worthy man was frightened nearly out of his wits by the enormous alligators, which bit pieces out of his boat and nearly succeeded in devouring him.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Frederick Albion Ober (1849–1913)

Frederick Ober was born in Beverly, Massachusetts, to a relatively impoverished family and had little formal education. At 14, he learned the shoemaker's trade, the traditional winter occupation of local fishermen; at 18, he was working in a drug store; at 21, he was in business with his father. However, his passion was ornithology. As a teenager, he taught himself taxidermy, collected and classified nearly all the birds of New England, and attracted the attention of Alexander Agassiz, the distinguished biologist from Harvard.

In 1871, Ober abandoned business and went on a major expedition to Florida to explore Lake Okeechobee, writing a series of vivid journal articles. For the next twenty years, he was an almost constant traveler, principally in the Caribbean, but also in México, Spain, North Africa, and northern South America. Ober initially saw himself as a scientist; he sent much material back to the Smithsonian Institution, two species of birds carry his name, and the Smithsonian published the report of his first Caribbean expedition. However, after the commercial success of his travel book, *Camps in the Caribbees: The Adventures of a Naturalist in the Lesser Antilles* (1879), Ober broadened his horizons and, after some financial struggles, made a career for himself as a travel writer, journalist, public lecturer, novelist, and historian.

Ober wrote over forty books, including three classic travel books: *Camps in the Caribbees* (1879), the long and beautifully produced *Travels in Mexico and Life among the Mexicans* (1884), and the book that resulted from his appointment as collector of Caribbean and Columbus-

related material for the quatercentenary, *In the Wake of Columbus: Adventures of the Special Commissioner sent by the World's Columbian Exposition to the West Indies* (1893). In addition, two of many novels had a contemporary Caribbean setting: *Under the Cuban Flag, or the Cacique's Treasure* (1897) and *The Last of the Arawaks: A Story of Adventure on the Island of San Domingo* (1901).

In the last years of his life he worked as a real-estate dealer in Hackensack, New Jersey, where he died in 1913. Since his death, nobody has taken much interest in Frederick Ober or his writings, but, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, Ober probably knew as much about the Caribbean as anyone in the United States. He had traveled widely in the region, especially in the more remote parts rarely visited by other travelers, met with many of the statesmen and leading figures, and read widely about the area's history. Nobody knew the contemporary situation of the small indigenous populations as well, and few had a better knowledge of its history and the history of Spanish colonialism with which it was intertwined. In one sense, however, this made Ober an atypical figure. After 1898, when the stream of writing about the Spanish-speaking Caribbean became a torrent, his would seem like a minor voice, that of an amateur drowned by the instant expertise of economists, sociologists, and other analysts of the backward islands that had fallen into U.S. hands.

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