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## The Servants and Mrs. Rawlings: Martha Mickens and African American Life at Cross Creek

by Rebecca Sharpless

The year is about 1940. It is evening at Cross Creek, the home of author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, a simple wood-frame house set among working orange groves near Hawthorne in North Central Florida. An unknown photographer is documenting an evening of dining and entertainment for Rawlings and a group of her friends, who like the author are white people of means and accomplishment. One photograph focuses on three African American women who are standing in a row and singing, their eyes cast upward, accompanied by a man on the harmonica. A second man leans on the head of a guitar, and the guests, in the foreground, listen attentively. The performers are all Rawlings's employees or their family members: a woman in her sixties named Martha Mickens, two of her adult children, and the children's spouses. They are likely singing spirituals or hymns, for Martha Mickens knows a huge repertoire.<sup>1</sup> In a second photograph of

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1. Image 180 and 241, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida; Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 34-35; Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Private Marjorie: The Love Letters of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings to Norton S. Baskin*, ed. Rodger S. Tarr (Gainesville: University Press of Florida,



An evening at the Cross Creek home of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, c. 1940. Idella Parker is in the background. *Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.*

the same evening, Rawlings's friend Rebecca Camp stands in the middle of the dining room. Behind Camp, with her back to the camera and headed toward the kitchen, is Idella Parker, Rawlings's cook, in full formal servant's uniform: white headpiece, dark dress

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2004), 466. The title of this article refers to Alison Light, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), a study of Virginia Woolf and her employees. As one critic points out, the book, as the title conveys, discusses primarily Mrs. Woolf with the servants being secondary to the famous author, Kathryn J. Oberdeck, "Hewers of Words and Drawers of Water," *Journal of Women's History* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 142. In this essay, I hope to foreground the servants and not Marjorie Rawlings. For an analysis of the relationship between Parker and Rawlings, see Rebecca Sharpless, "Neither Friends nor Peers: Idella Parker, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and the Limits of Gender Solidarity at Cross Creek," *Journal*

with a white collar, and white apron. Although the dining table is not visible, the diners likely enjoyed one of Parker's sumptuous meals, perhaps a roast pork loin from one of Rawlings's pigs or seafood Newburg, made with fresh fish from the nearby Atlantic, served on one of Rawlings's several sets of imported china.<sup>2</sup> The photograph centers on Camp in her evening dress; Parker, in her worker's garb, is busy in the background.

The pleasures of this splendidly clad, distinguished group of white people, from their dinner to their entertainment, were made possible by the efforts of the African American employees who maintained a strong presence at Cross Creek both in Rawlings's writings and in reality.<sup>3</sup> Between the time that Rawlings and her first husband, Charles Rawlings, bought the farm in 1928 and her death in 1953, at least twenty employees worked on the premises. These employees engaged in a variety of labors, from managing orange groves to scrubbing laundry to making Hollandaise sauce. Most of the workers, such as Beatrice, Kate, and Raymond, whose family names are unrecorded, stayed only briefly. Idella Parker remained for ten years, off and on. Rawlings constantly fretted about her need for steady workers, even unsuccessfully attempting on three occasions to take young girls and turn them into household workers who would stay at Cross Creek after they grew up.<sup>4</sup> She wanted good household help so that she could maintain an undisturbed writing schedule as well as a lively entertaining calendar befitting a prize-winning author.

Amid this swirl of employees was one elderly woman, Martha Mickens, who with her husband, Will Mickens, formed the nucleus of life at Cross Creek for almost half a century. As Rawlings characterized it, "The colored population of the Creek has the solid base of

2. For examples of menus at Cross Creek, see Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 230-31, 238, 253, 259, 273, 274, 294, 296, 369, 384.

3. Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 298. "Cross Creek" refers both to the community on the shore of Orange Lake and to the Rawlings household; Rawlings and others used the term interchangeably.

4. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 84-89; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 148-49, 352, 390, 402, 417, 436; Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Selected Letters of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings*, ed. Gordon E. Bigelow and Laura V. Monti (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 253; Idella Parker, *Idella Parker: From Reddick to Cross Creek* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 101; Idella Parker, *Idella: Marjorie Rawlings' "Perfect Maid"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992),

the Mickens family, against which other transient Negroes surge and retreat.”<sup>5</sup> But Martha Mickens provided a solid base not only for the African Americans but for Marjorie Rawlings as well. Day in, day out, Rawlings could depend on Mickens to be present. When Idella Parker, the cook, took off in a huff, as she frequently did, Martha Mickens stepped in to lay the morning fires. When her son, Little Will Mickens, failed to gather the morning’s eggs, Martha Mickens tended the hens in his absence. Martha Mickens referred to this practice as “taking up the slack,”<sup>6</sup> and her constancy kept Cross Creek, in all of its complexity, from spinning out of control. While everyone else came and went, Martha and Will Mickens remained stationary, living on the place until their deaths in 1960 and 1964, respectively.

The Cross Creek of Martha Mickens differed from that of Marjorie Rawlings and even that of Idella Parker. Mickens experienced North Central Florida as someone who had been there, seen the orange groves thrive, and stayed as the groves were dwindling.<sup>7</sup> Hers was almost totally a rural experience, as she seldom ventured more than a few miles from Cross Creek.<sup>8</sup> Examining her life illuminates much about change and continuity in the rural South. Mickens embodied the old ways of rural living in tension with others who sought life off the farm. No one else knew what she knew, and no one else stayed while she stayed. Around her, the world was shifting, but Martha Mickens maintained her serene lifestyle despite the people around her who craved motion and modernity. Her relationships with Rawlings, Parker, and her own daughters, Adrenna Mickens and Sissie Fountain, demonstrate that women’s lives at Cross Creek varied not only in terms of race, but also according to social class, education, age, and childbearing. While the women shared the characteristic of sex, as well as the residential experience at Cross Creek, each one’s life was still very different from that of the others. Each woman negotiated her circumstances

5. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 25. The older Will Mickens is often referred to as “Old Will,” to distinguish him from their son, “Little Will.” J. T. Glisson refers to the Mickenses as “the Creek’s only black family,” J. T. Glisson, *The Creek* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 87.

6. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 31.

7. Glisson, *The Creek*, 93. For a summary of the freezes in Central Florida, see Geoff Dobson, “Historic City Memories II: The Death of the Citrus Industry in Northeast Florida,” *Historic City News*, <http://www.historiccit.com/2009/staugustine/news/florida/historic-city-memories-the-big-freeze-ii-2223> (accessed September 10, 2010).

in her own way, and each formed her own relationships with Rawlings and with one another. Biological labels or sexual identity did not create solidarity between the women at Cross Creek.

Examining Cross Creek from Martha Mickens's perspective tilts the published narratives about the farm to a new angle, away from the wealthy novelist and even from that of other African American workers, toward the constant, unflappable woman rooted in Alachua County. But to look at Cross Creek as Mickens might have, one must depend on the words of others. Mickens could barely read or write and no member of her family seems to have left any written materials. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings commented extensively about the workers at Cross Creek. Affecting and amusing tales of life in the orange groves and hummocks of the region appeared in a book of essays, *Cross Creek*, and a cookbook, *Cross Creek Cookery*, both published in 1942.<sup>9</sup> Rawlings was also a prolific letter writer, and she talked about the workers at length in her correspondence, particularly in her letters to her husband, Norton Baskin.<sup>10</sup> The Mickenses, especially Martha, figure large in all of Rawlings's accounts. In a unique turn of affairs, Idella Parker, who worked as Rawlings's cook off and on between 1940 and 1950, also published two volumes of autobiography in which she eloquently and forcefully told her side of her tumultuous relationship with Rawlings.<sup>11</sup>

9. Relatively little criticism of Rawlings's work exists. Carolyn Jones, "Race and the Rural in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *Cross Creek*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 57 (Spring 2004): 215-30, examines some of Rawlings's writings about Martha Mickens. C. Anita Tarr, "The Evolution of a 'Southern Liberal': Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Race," *The Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature* 15 (2007): 141-62, thoughtfully discusses Rawlings's contradictory racial views.

10. Other employers' accounts of servants may be found in Dolly Lunt Burge, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879*, ed. Christine Jacobson Carter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia before the War* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1895); Magnolia Wynn Le Guin, *A Home-Concealed Woman: The Diaries of Magnolia Wynn Le Guin, 1901-1913*, ed. Charles A. Le Guin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Frances Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation since the War* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1883); Elizabeth Waites Allston Pringle, *A Woman Rice Planter* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914); Harriott Horry Ravenel, *Eliza Pinckney* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896); Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore, MD: Cushings and Bailey, 1887); Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

11. Parker, *Idella; Parker, From Reddick to Cross Creek*.

Parker lived and worked alongside Martha Mickens for the better part of a decade, and she too discussed her older colleague. J. T. Glisson, a writer who grew up in Cross Creek in the 1930s and early 1940s, made passing comments about Mickens in his memoir.<sup>12</sup> A handful of photographs, probably taken by friends of Rawlings, extend the record a bit further. We know about the lives of Martha Mickens and her family members mainly because of their association with Marjorie Rawlings.

Scenes such as the Cross Creek dinner party were hardly new in 1940; for more than four centuries, affluent white people in the American South benefited from the labor of African Americans in their homes. African American women, in particular, took care of children, cooked, cleaned, did laundry, and performed a constellation of other tasks so that their white owners or employers could pursue other activities, including leisure. After the Civil War, African American women used domestic work as a bridge from slavery to the open economy created by the civil rights acts of the 1960s. It was employment that was widely available, despite the numerous drawbacks. African American women controlled their working conditions to the greatest extent that they could and most left domestic service as soon as other opportunities opened.<sup>13</sup>

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings depended on her African American employees to maintain her standard of living. She made her literary fortune writing about the poor whites of upper Florida in her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Yearling* (1938) and other works, but the lifestyle that she created for herself in Alachua County was anything

12. Glisson, *The Creek*.

13. The secondary literature on domestic workers in the postbellum South includes Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Dianne Swann-Wright, *A Way Out of No Way: Claiming Family and Freedom in the New South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Lois Rita Helmbold, "Making Choices, Making Do: Black and White Working Class Women's Lives and Work during the Great Depression" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1983).

but plain. Rawlings maintained a steady stream of house guests, some for weeks at a time and others for an evening, and she prided herself on providing sumptuous food for them. The workers at Cross Creek spent their days maintaining the household of one woman and her companions.<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, the lifestyle of Martha Mickens at Cross Creek appears to be a throwback, a relic of an era in which African Americans lived on the premises of their employers, available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, Mickens's living and working conditions were also a function of the rurality and relative isolation of Cross Creek. While domestic workers in urban areas overwhelmingly chose to live in their own homes and commute to their work places, those at Cross Creek had little choice but to live there because of its comparative remoteness, more than twenty miles from Ocala and accessible only on sandy roads. Since none of the workers at Cross Creek had their own vehicles, they had to walk, hitch a ride, or get permission from Rawlings to borrow the grove truck or her Oldsmobile. During her first three months there, Idella Parker likened it to a plantation: "It seemed just like what my grandmother had told me about slavery. All the days I had been there, all I saw was Mrs. Rawlings and the people who worked for her."<sup>16</sup> The physical conditions, too, reflected an older era which was on the decline in urban America by the 1940s, when many of the poorest neighborhoods had at least some access to city utilities. The workers at Cross Creek had no running water, indoor plumbing, or electricity for their personal use, although Rawlings added those conveniences gradually to their work space, her home and workplace.<sup>17</sup> By the 1940s, most people living in towns bought most, if not all, of their

14. Norton Baskin, whom Rawlings married in 1941, spent most of World War II in Burma. Upon returning to the U.S., he lived at his hotel, Castle Warden, in St. Augustine, ninety miles away. Baskin never maintained a primary residence at Cross Creek.

15. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 297; Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 184.

16. Parker, *Idella*, 40.

17. U.S. National Park Service, *National Historic Landmark Nomination for the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings House and Farm Yard*, Murray D. Laurie, September 30, 2005, 6, <http://www.nps.gov/nhl/designations/samples/fl/Rawlings%20house.pdf> (accessed August 29, 2010). The tenant house may have had electricity by the late 1940s, when Rawlings stipulated in her will that Mickens was to have electricity without charge for the rest of her life.



food. At Cross Creek, conversely, the Mickenses raised much of the food that was consumed by Rawlings and her guests as well as the workers. For Rawlings, and especially her readers and guests who did not have to perform any of the labor or miss any of the events of the larger world, the absence of technology and the local food supply was likely a significant part of the charm of Cross Creek. But for the workers, modernity, it seems, stopped at the Cross Creek gate.

Martha Mickens lived and worked competently, perhaps even happily, in such a rustic setting. After seventy years in Central Florida, Mickens possessed a wealth of knowledge about how to function in the rural South that Rawlings lacked and needed badly, particularly when it came to caring for livestock. Rawlings's efforts to import the finery of the outside world into the countryside, conversely, created only difficulty for Mickens. She cooked poorly and continually failed to place the silverware correctly on the dining table. She could not be both the animal tender and the consummate house servant that Rawlings so desired. Rawlings's yearning to have the best of both worlds—Wedgwood in a cracker cottage, haute cuisine made from home-grown ingredients—meant that she needed both Martha Mickens and someone in the kitchen. Rawlings tried persistently to remake Mickens's daughters, Adrenna Mickens and Sissie Mickens Fountain, into the urbane workers that she desired to produce sophisticated meals, but the sisters never succeeded in pleasing her. Only Idella Parker, college-educated and trained as a cook in a wealthy home in West Palm Beach, could prepare the food that Rawlings wanted for herself and her guests.<sup>18</sup> Parker's knowledge of city ways was crucial to Rawlings's idealization of the rural, while Mickens's knowledge of rural life actually kept the operation afloat.

Martha Mickens was born in Florida about 1880 to a relatively prosperous farming family and married Will Mickens about 1895.<sup>19</sup> Ac-

18. Parker, *Idella*, 13.

19. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 160. Confusion exists about Martha Mickens's age. The 1930 census says that Will Mickens was twelve years her senior, born in 1868 and married for the first time in 1877, which would mean that he had a wife before Martha. The census says that Martha Mickens was born in 1880 and married in 1895. Rawlings describes Mickens's age in the late 1920s or early 1930s as "getting on to seventy," which would mean that the census is incorrect, Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 27. Rawlings confirms that Will is "some ten years older than she," *Ibid.*, 33. In a 1965 interview, Will Mickens is described as ninety-nine years old, putting his birth year at 1866 and Martha's, therefore, about 1876, Nixon Smiley, "She Wept, Cussed as He Left": Uncle Recalls Day Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' Husband Quit Cross Creek," *Miami Herald*, December 19, 1965. Rawlings, therefore, seems to have exaggerated Martha's age by about ten years.

According to Rawlings, Will and Martha Mickens worked at Cross Creek when the grove was first planted in the early twentieth century. When Rawlings met them in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the Mickenses were living four miles from Cross Creek, and Martha Mickens was walking back and forth, doing laundry and other tasks for the residents of the area, including Rawlings.<sup>20</sup> They later moved into the old McKay house nearer Cross Creek and in 1939 settled into the tenant house which Rawlings had erected in 1934.<sup>21</sup> Even after setting up housekeeping at Cross Creek and spending the preponderance of her time in the service of Rawlings, Martha Mickens continued washing for other residents, occasionally helping at labor-intensive tasks such as hog killing, and serving as a practical nurse for the sick. Her work mattered not only to Rawlings but to the entire community of Cross Creek.<sup>22</sup>

Martha and Will Mickens had ten children, some of whom stayed in Florida and some who left. The oldest daughter, Idella, lived close enough to visit on Sundays.<sup>23</sup> Another daughter, Hattie, lived outside Baltimore, where she did domestic work for one family from the late 1920s until her death in 1944.<sup>24</sup> One son, "Little Will" Mickens, came and went from Cross Creek. Another son farmed near Flemington, eighteen miles west of Cross Creek, and maintained regular contact with his parents.<sup>25</sup> Daughter Estelle and her husband, Sam Sweet, worked around Cross Creek then moved to Hawthorne, four miles away, in 1936.<sup>26</sup> Adrenna Mickens was the first member of the family to work for Rawlings full-time, arriving sometime in the late 1930s. According to J. T. Glisson, Adrenna Mickens had numerous husbands. In 1939 she was married briefly to a man named C. J. Samson, who also worked at Cross Creek.<sup>27</sup> Zamilla, also known as Sissie, was married to Henry Foun-

20. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 27-29, 33; Glisson, *The Creek*, 77, 87. The chronology of the Mickenses' residences is unclear. In 1930, the only census in which Will and Martha Mickens appear, they were living in Evanston, on the other side of Orange Lake from Cross Creek (Fifteenth Census of the U.S., 1930). Rawlings says that they lived "for years" on the Guthrie place, "in the woods," Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 148.

21. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 24, 211; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 87.

22. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 216.

23. "Visitor's Recollection, 1984-88," May 1, 1988, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida.

24. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 178-79. Rawlings spells her name "Hettie" in 1944, *Ibid.*, 411.

25. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 140.

26. Glisson, *The Creek*, 136.

27. *Ibid.*

tain until his death in 1943, which left her with four small children, and she cooked for Rawlings in her early widowhood. The Mickens grandchildren also played a role at Cross Creek. In 1943, Rawlings decided to train two of Sissie Mickens Fountain's children, a boy and a girl, as servants. In the summer of 1944 she brought Little Martha Fountain, age four, into the house at Cross Creek for Idella Parker to supervise.<sup>28</sup> Although she claimed that she was taking Little Martha "not to make a [slave] of her but to give her a chance," Rawlings soon complained that the preschooler was a trial who fibbed to get out of work. Little Martha was confined to the kitchen and not allowed into the living areas of the house.<sup>29</sup> By October, the experiment had ended and the child returned to her mother.<sup>30</sup> Adrenna Mickens's son Jack, born about 1920, worked at the farm during World War II, and another grandson, March, came to work in the early 1950s. For the offspring who stayed in Central Florida, the stability of Will and Martha Mickens played a significant role. The tenant house at Cross Creek became their port in the storm, the place where they could go when circumstances elsewhere soured. Their parents did not own the space, but they opened the doors regardless.

Martha and Will Mickens moved to Cross Creek in 1939 while their daughter Adrenna Mickens was working as Rawlings's cook. Soon thereafter, Martha became indispensable to the running of the household. Martha and Will's duties at Cross Creek during the late 1930s and 1940s consisted mostly of supplying food for Rawlings and others on the farm. Both of them worked in the garden, and Will Mickens raised potatoes, broccoli, lettuce, parsley, beans, beets, sweet potatoes, and cabbages on shares, giving some to Rawlings in return for the use of the land and keeping some for his and Martha Mickens's consumption.<sup>31</sup> Tomatoes and collard greens grew in abundance as well.<sup>32</sup> Rawlings sometimes participated in gardening, working with Martha Mickens to set out tomato, eggplant, and bell pepper plants in the spring of 1940. Rawlings expected Martha Mickens to do the ongoing work of tending the plants, however, for she complained in July 1944 that Mickens

28. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 148-49, 352, 390; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 253; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 101; Parker, *Idella*, 57-58.

29. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 402, 417.

30. *Ibid.*, 436.

31. *Ibid.*, 140, 196.

had “simply abandoned my garden.”<sup>33</sup> The farm also had oranges and tangerines for home consumption, and apparently the workers received some of the crop.<sup>34</sup> Mickens’s granddaughter, Agnes Jenkins, recalled coming to Cross Creek on Sundays to visit her grandparents and to “play and eat oranges.”<sup>35</sup>

Cross Creek supported a significant poultry population; when Rawlings left to spend several months in North Carolina in 1934, she left a worker named Kate with the responsibility for fifty-four young chickens (possums and skunks subsequently killed all of them).<sup>36</sup> After her return to the farm, Martha Mickens bore most of the duty for poultry production, tending the hens and ducks, gathering eggs, and caring for the chicks and ducklings.<sup>37</sup> In a 1944 letter to Baskin, Rawlings described Mickens’s skill with poultry and yearned for her return from St. Petersburg where she was caring for her sick daughter, Adrenna. In a rare admission of her own incompetence, Rawlings wrote, “Baby chicks and ducklings are hatching and Sissie doesn’t keep up with them, and I don’t know how to take care of them when things go wrong, and we are losing them. I found a baby chick wandering alone by the front steps and he was so glad to see somebody and be picked up and have his cold feet warmed. Martha would have known where he came from and to whom he belonged.”<sup>38</sup> Neither of the younger women—Rawlings or Sissie Fountain—possessed Mickens’s ability to tend the poultry. After raising the chickens, Mickens killed and dressed them for her employer’s table. The tasks of killing the birds, eviscerating them, cutting off heads and claws, and plucking the feathers from the corpses all fell to her so that Rawlings or the cooks could simply get a clean bird from the icebox for cooking. Resourceful, Mickens once took the loser of a cockfight, dressed him, and put him in the icebox for consumption.<sup>39</sup> Mickens’s skill and knowledge developed through decades of working with domestic birds. Idella Parker, many years younger and less experienced

33. Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 183-84; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 420.

34. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1942), 206; Parker, *Idella*, 27.

35. Unpaged recollection of Agnes Jenkins, May 1, 1988, file “Visitor’s Recollections, 1984-88,” Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida.

36. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 192.

37. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 369.

38. *Ibid.*, 312.

39. Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery*, 102-3; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 110, 222, 295,



Rawlings and Mickens pose with some of the chickens raised at Cross Creek. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol89/iss4/7>

than Mickens, had to rely on her colleague to teach her how to get rid of the tiny pinfeathers on a duck.<sup>40</sup>

Martha Mickens also had responsibility for caring for the cows. Numerous bovines inhabited Cross Creek over two decades, including the much-revered Dora, source of extraordinarily rich butter and cream for Rawlings's recipes.<sup>41</sup> Dairy production took skill, for the cows had to be bred in a timely fashion and milked regularly to keep a steady supply of milk flowing from their udders.<sup>42</sup> Martha Mickens proved her mettle in breeding cows as late as 1951, overseeing the production of a cow named Chrissie.<sup>43</sup> Mickens, sometimes with her son Little Will Mickens, herded the cows and ensured that they were fed regularly, and she was also responsible for making buttermilk, churning cream into butter, and occasionally selling the butter.<sup>44</sup>

Rawlings owned numerous hogs, and Mickens assisted in their care, which mainly consisted of feeding them but also meant helping with vaccinations. After struggling, along with four other people, to inoculate nine shoats, Mickens expressed her disdain for the animals: "Folks say they don't know where the devil is. Huh, I know. He in hogs."<sup>45</sup> Hog killing, the southern cold-weather ritual, apparently took place annually at Cross Creek, providing a continuing supply of pork products. In most southern households, men killed and bled the hogs, while women processed the meat. Martha Mickens assisted several white families around the area with their butchering and customarily received part of the meat as her pay. Sausage making was a crucial part of hog killing, and at Cross Creek, they rendered lard quickly after the butchering. Mickens stood at the wash pot over the open fire, cooking down pork fat into the white cream that would serve as the basis of everything from frying to pie crusts.<sup>46</sup>

The workers' days at Cross Creek began early. Their first priorities were to make the main house warm and to fix Rawlings's breakfast in time for her to rise about seven o'clock. The house had a wood-burning stove and fireplaces for heat, and the men supplied

40. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 419, 420, 443; Parker, *Idella*, 71.

41. Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery*, 199-200; Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 80-81.

42. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 192. Rawlings details her own difficulties in attempting to milk in *Ibid.*, 119-20.

43. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 102, 625; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 345.

44. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 54, 158, 281, 539-40; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 99; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 272.

45. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 365.

firewood for both cooking and heating. The cook usually lit a fire in Rawlings's bedroom about breakfast time, and Mickens taught other workers precisely how Rawlings liked her meals served.<sup>47</sup> After breakfast, the workers commenced their other daily chores. The house at Cross Creek was a simple ell in design, with two bedrooms and a living room on one angle and the dining room and kitchen on the other. Although Rawlings installed indoor plumbing over time, the outhouse and the outdoor water pump remained fixtures for many years.<sup>48</sup> The cook did most of the regular cleaning, but Mickens pitched in when needed. After one of Rawlings's extended absences, Mickens discovered a four-foot-long water moccasin blocking the toilet. Rawlings wrote, "It stuck its head up when she sifted in the Dutch cleanser, and stuck it up again when I peered in."<sup>49</sup> Rawlings slammed down the lid and left to run errands. By the time she returned, Rawlings's neighbor Leonard Fiddia, presumably summoned by Mickens, had killed the snake.

The processes and products of cooking created conflict between Rawlings and her employees, particularly Martha Mickens. Until Idella Parker arrived at Cross Creek in October 1940, Rawlings searched constantly for a cook who could meet her high standards. Rawlings was herself a superb cook, and she expected the finest foods not only for her guests but for herself when she was alone. Martha Mickens was never the primary cook, although she filled in as best she could, and seldom pleased her employer.<sup>50</sup> Norton Baskin told a story, which he intended to be humorous, about Mickens keeping warm a three-minute egg (an egg barely cooked, with a very runny yolk) by putting it back in the cooking water, which of course cooked the egg past its desired doneness.<sup>51</sup> In both her public and private writings Rawlings recounted the accomplishments of her cooks, such as Beatrice's pride in her tangerine sherbet and Meade's ability to make Hollandaise sauce.<sup>52</sup>

46. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 186, 456. Tellingly, *Cross Creek Cookery* does not have a recipe for pie crust. Apparently Rawlings considered it too basic or plebeian to be included.

47. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 261, 313; Parker, *Idella*, 28; Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 101; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 90, 99.

48. Laurie, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 4-6.

49. Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 272.

50. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 557.

51. "Cross Creek: 'Cheese Grits-No Greater Feast,'" October 24, 1968, file "Mickens," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/flhq/vol89/iss4/7> Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 166.

Both of these employees left Cross Creek quickly, however, and the Mickens family always stepped into the breach. Neither Sissie Mickens Fountain nor Adrenna Mickens had any formal culinary training, and their shortcomings as cooks drove Rawlings to distraction. She despaired of Fountain's ability to learn: "The hopelessness of cream sauce, of Hollandaise, of Mayonnaise, when soft-boiling an egg is something revolutionary!"<sup>53</sup> Rawlings taught Fountain to make a cream cheese and olive spread while fretting that she "doesn't even know how to butter bread for our kind of sandwich"—not indicating what "our kind" of sandwich might be.<sup>54</sup> To Rawlings, the Mickens daughters were not only ignorant but also unteachable.

When Idella Parker arrived at Cross Creek in the fall of 1940, Martha Mickens became her occasional assistant. A very fine cook, Parker was capable of turning out elaborate meals for crowds. A photograph taken about 1940 shows Mickens and Parker in the kitchen preparing a feast. Parker, in a white uniform and headpiece, is working with a turkey or large chicken, possibly trussing it, and a ham studded with cloves sits nearby. Mickens, in a dark dress with a white apron and the white cap that she often wore, is standing in front of the sink and looking at an orange in her left hand. A bottle of alcohol, perhaps the sherry used in one of Rawlings's favorite ham recipes, sits next to the ham.<sup>55</sup> A sheet cake, frosted with white icing and decorated with fruit, is in the foreground, and a tree branch with large oranges is also on the table. The meal consists of multiple courses. Parker, not Mickens, is in charge of the entrée, even though it is likely that Mickens raised and slaughtered the bird. The two women appear to be working harmoniously in the small kitchen despite the difference in their skill levels. Rawling's guests would eat well that night, as on many other occasions.

While Cross Creek was a rambling old farmhouse, Rawlings used formal table service for both her meals alone and intricate dinner parties for guests, whether served à la russe, with each course brought to the table sequentially, or buffet style.<sup>56</sup> Her

53. Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 166; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 143.

54. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 139, 177.

55. Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery*, 114-15.

56. *Ibid.*, 97, 206; Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 98; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 462; Parker,



household employees routinely wore uniforms, and her tables featured the finest European tableware.<sup>57</sup> Rawlings complained constantly of her employees' inability to set a proper table.<sup>58</sup> She particularly grumbled about the Mickenses' inability to set formal place settings: "Training Sissie is an appalling job, not for any lack of willingness on her part, but from her abysmal ignorance. I think she has lived an even leaner life than Martha, poor soul. I've explained three times where things go on a tray, and they still look as though Sissie had stood off at a distance and held the tray and Martha had pitched over the silver and dishes like a drunken quoit player—and for all I know, that may be exactly the way the trays *are* laid."<sup>59</sup> Rawlings refused to give up her urban sophistication and continued trying to bend the Mickenses to her ways.

Martha Mickens's primary task aside from food preparation was laundry, which she did every Monday. Cross Creek had only the rudest of washing equipment, and laundry was hot, hard, and somewhat dangerous work. With the water boiling in washtubs over open fires, Mickens scrubbed with lye soap or Octagon brand soap, boiling the clothes for half an hour, then rinsing them twice. Idella Parker recalled that it took seven buckets of water to fill the wash pot, each one toted from the pump. Mickens, Parker, and other women who happened to be present hung the wet clothes on the line, where they dried until sundown. Laundry, like animal husbandry, took place outside, and the outdoors is where Mickens functioned best. But her duties crossed into the house as well: after laundry, Mickens and Parker ironed in between other tasks. By 1943, Rawlings had bought an electric iron, but the old flatirons

57. Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery*, 60. The dining room at Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park exhibits two sets of Wedgwood that belonged to Rawlings. According to J. T. Glisson, in January 1940 Adrenna Mickens borrowed a set of Limoges, unbeknownst to Rawlings, for a new year's celebration, Glisson, *The Creek*, 136, 141. A photograph taken about 1941 shows Parker on the back porch steps in a white uniform and headpiece, carrying a bucket. Martha Mickens and Little Will Mickens's girlfriend, Alberta, are wearing aprons, and hats with wide brims, while Little Will Mickens is dressed in overalls, Image 179, Rawlings Collection, University of Florida. In 1950, Rawlings detailed Parker's uniform wardrobe: "Eight in all, from her oldest worn ones that I ordered last summer, up to her two fancy and expensive white ones, one poplin, one a \$16. Nylon," Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 570.

58. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 142, 225, 635, 637; Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 33, 198.

59. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 142. Quoit is a game similar to horseshoes, played

remained in the house as backup. No mechanical failure would stop ironing day.<sup>60</sup>

As valuable as she was at helping run the Cross Creek farm, Martha Mickens helped Rawlings in other ways as well. Over seven decades, Martha Mickens developed a deep knowledge of spiritual matters as well as practical ones, and she shared her learning freely. Rawlings took much of this information and turned it into fodder for her writing. Mickens, Rawlings wrote, was a "Primitive, or foot-washing, Baptist," but she did not attend worship regularly because the nearest church was in Micanopy, ten miles on the other side of Orange Lake, and her transportation depended on Rawlings's loaning her a vehicle and someone to drive, since Mickens did not know how to operate a vehicle.<sup>61</sup> Despite her lack of a church community, Mickens had great reverence for Christianity, spoke often of her love for God and gave generously to a nearby church from her meager funds.<sup>62</sup> Rawlings reported that Mickens was extremely happy to receive a Bible from Norman and Julie Berg, friends of Rawlings, in 1947. According to Rawlings, it was Mickens's first Bible, and she requested that her employer read to her from it. Mickens knew a wide repertoire of spirituals, and her family members shared their wealth of knowledge with Rawlings and her guests.<sup>63</sup> Idella Parker was horrified at the performances, which she believed opened the Mickenses up to ridicule. The use of drink to entice the Mickenses to sing particularly disgusted Parker. Rawlings and her guests, Parker said, "made fun of us black people right to our faces, and supposed that we were too stupid to know it."<sup>64</sup> Mickens sometimes turned singing to her advantage, however, by requesting cash tips from random visitors to Cross Creek for performing in her sweet soprano voice.<sup>65</sup> The Mickenses also apparently enjoyed music for their own pleasure. Although Martha

60. Ibid., 151, 297, 325; Parker, *Idella*, 31-32; Unpagued recollection of Idella Parker, June 8, 1985, "Visitor's recollections, 1984-88," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida. It is unclear whether Mickens did her own family's laundry with Rawlings's.

61. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 34; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 176.

62. Glisson, *The Creek*, 145; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 285; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 306.

63. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 34-35; Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 236; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 466.

64. Parker, *Idella*, 80-81; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 96-98, 153. The quotation comes from Parker, *Idella*, 81.

65. Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 236; Parker, *Cross Creek*, 34.

Mickens disapproved of the blues, on summer nights the family sang to the accompaniment of Little Will Mickens's guitar.<sup>66</sup>

Martha Mickens's knowledge also included a storehouse of traditional beliefs. According to Rawlings, she allowed Mickens to structure household chores according to her convictions about the proper sequencing of cleaning and discarding debris.<sup>67</sup> Mickens also engaged in various types of conjuring, which Rawlings referred to as "Martha's voodoo." The magic that Mickens described included a friend who "tolled back" her errant husband "by getting some hairs from his head and burying them with other items under the house" and the proper composition of a "cunjur bag" with a particular bone of a black cat boiled alive. Although Rawlings apparently never indulged in casting spells, she wrote about them in *Cross Creek*, making Mickens appear primitive and curious to an international audience.

The reasons that Martha Mickens stayed at Cross Creek and that Idella Parker, Adrenna Mickens, and Sissie Mickens Fountain left and returned several times were numerous and complex. The desire to be near their mother likely motivated the Mickens daughters, but money almost certainly constituted a much more tempting factor. Despite considerable drawbacks as an employer, Rawlings compensated her employees more equitably than did most employers in the South. In 1940, Adrenna Mickens was earning \$4.50 a week. By 1944, Rawlings was paying Martha Mickens \$5 per week, better wages than many full-time domestic workers received. Idella Parker's income for 1943 totaled \$1,040 a year, or \$20 a week, exceedingly good wages for domestic work.<sup>68</sup> Rawlings also attempted to harass her neighbors into a similar wage structure, and in 1943 the Brice family was shamed into paying Sissie Fountain \$6 a week and not charging her rent.<sup>69</sup> Government funds helped during the 1940s, and Rawlings actively sought pensions as supplemental income for the Mickens family. Martha and Will Mickens received "old-age pensions" from the "Welfare Board" which in 1944 amounted to \$5 a week for Martha Mickens and

66. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 34-35, 282; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 196.

67. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 311-12.

68. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 49, 327. For a comparison of domestic workers' wages, see Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 185-87.

\$5.25 for her husband.<sup>70</sup> Henry Fountain was a World War I veteran, and after his death in 1943, Sissie Mickens Fountain received his veterans' pension of forty dollars per month for herself and her children.<sup>71</sup>

Lodging also came as part of the compensation package, a feature not always welcome but necessary at Cross Creek. Although most African American domestic workers preferred to live in their own homes and commute to their work sites, the remoteness of Cross Creek made living on the premises a simpler solution than living in town. Realizing this, in 1934 Rawlings built a structure that she called "the nigger tenant house." If one could house one's workers, Rawlings observed, one "can always get someone."<sup>72</sup> Rawlings made an addition to the tenant house about 1939, and Martha and Will Mickens moved in at that time.<sup>73</sup> Rawlings considered this lodging part of the Mickenses' compensation, though it was anything but capacious. The rooms were open to the rafters and clothes hung from nails on the walls. Sanitary facilities consisted of an outhouse, three tin wash-tubs, a hand pump, and a rain barrel.<sup>74</sup> As various members of the Mickens family came and went from Cross Creek, they all lived in the tenant house. When Idella Parker arrived in the fall of 1940, Martha and Will Mickens, their son Little Will, and his girlfriend Alberta were sharing the space. Parker had her own room, divided from the Mickenses by a curtain strung across the doorway. In 1941, Rawlings built an apartment on the back for Parker, giving the Mickens family the two older rooms. At one point in 1944, the Mickens' two rooms held Martha, Will, their grandson Jack, Sissie Mickens Fountain, and Fountain's four children.<sup>75</sup> The cramped quarters required no cash expenditure from the Mickenses, however, and were better than many of their counterparts, which often leaked, lacked windows, or were otherwise substandard. With the tenant house, Rawlings demonstrated both her ties to the majority of southern landowners and her difference. The house was better than most, though it was hardly

70. Ibid., 103, 327, 351. As agricultural workers, the Mickens were probably excluded from Social Security. The pensions likely came from the welfare board of Alachua County, Elna Green, e-mail communication, August 27, 2010.

71. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 163.

72. Rawlings, *Selected Letters*, 87.

73. Parker, *Cross Creek*, 64, 211, 311.

74. Parker, *Idella*, 22-23; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 87-88.

75. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 223; Parker, *Idella*, 22, 24; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 16.

adequate for the numbers of people it housed. Had Martha and Will Mickens lived there alone, the space issues would not have been so crucial, but the children and grandchildren remained a perennial, if varying, presence for the entire time that Rawlings owned Cross Creek. Rawlings wanted the benefit of the Mickens offsprings' labor, but she did not feel responsible for providing adequate housing for them. Rawlings also showed her preference for Idella Parker, giving her a room to herself and buying all new furniture in the early 1940s.<sup>76</sup>

Rawlings frequently paid for medical care for her employees and their family members. This was a vital service that she performed, often making a difference between life and death. The local hospitals were less than sympathetic to the medical needs of poor rural African Americans. Tom Glisson carted C. J. Samson, one of Rawlings's employees, to the hospital in Gainesville after his brother-in-law Henry Fountain put "three loads of No. 5 shot" into his abdomen. Glisson recalled, "I had a hell of a row with that fool woman that runs the county hospital. She wasn't going to let me bring him in unless I promised to pay his bill."<sup>77</sup> Glisson promised, but it was Rawlings who actually made the payment, including the cost of operations to remove shot from Samson's hands.<sup>78</sup> Rawlings never seemed to refuse requests for medical care, writing in *Cross Creek* that she was "doomed" to pay for a major surgery that Adrenna Mickens needed, and she sometimes went far beyond what her workers might reasonably expect.<sup>79</sup> Her employee Mary, whom Rawlings claimed was manic-depressive, needed a "minor operation," which Rawlings paid for, and then Rawlings "nursed her at home afterward."<sup>80</sup> When Idella Parker suffered complications from an appendectomy, Rawlings arranged for her to remain six weeks in the African American section of Flagler Hospital in St. Augustine and paid for a private nurse.<sup>81</sup> At other times, she let

76. Parker, *Idella*, 37.

77. Glisson, *The Creek*, 141-42.

78. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 202-3, 205. As a boy, J. T. Glisson adored Henry Fountain and told the story of the shooting from a perspective that was critical of Rawlings's handling of the situation between Fountain and Samson, Glisson, *The Creek*, 131-49. Number 5 shot is birdshot, large enough to do damage but usually not fatal to humans. According to Glisson, Samson slipped out of the hospital in the middle of the night and was never seen again.

79. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 213.

80. *Ibid.*, 144.

81. Parker, *Idella*, 90-92; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 124-25. For other examples see Rawlings, *Prison Majorie*, 554, 557-58.

the local social service agencies take financial responsibility. Sissie Fountain's two-year-old son David almost died from pneumonia in 1944 but recovered as a "charity case" at a Gainesville hospital.<sup>82</sup> The workers could apparently count on Rawlings for medical care, though the quantity and quality of the donated care varied from highly personal to nonstandard.

Cross Creek employees occasionally received leftover food from the main house, but for the most part, everyone except the cook relied on their own resources. In addition to the garden that they kept for their employer, the Mickenses had a separate plot of their own. Rawlings considered the garden space and seed that the Mickenses received as part of their compensation.<sup>83</sup> They also had their own hogs and chickens, sometimes obtained as gifts from Rawlings, though they paid for their own feed.<sup>84</sup> The Mickenses received their eggs and milk from Rawlings's chickens and cows that Martha Mickens tended.<sup>85</sup> Martha Mickens, however, was accustomed to cooking without dairy products. Rawlings related how Mickens could make sweet potato pone from grated sweet potatoes, flour, bacon grease, soda, cane syrup, and water. If Mickens had eggs, she added them, and she used butter and milk when they were available.<sup>86</sup>

The Mickens family made good use of wild supply. Martha Mickens loved turtle and turtle eggs, and she "rejoiced" when Rawlings captured wild possums, which could be penned and fed properly before cooking. Mickens also used wild produce, frying the so-called horse-banana and "call[ing] it edible," and making jelly from guavas which could have been either domestic or wild.<sup>87</sup> Mickens knew where wild plums and blueberries grew, and she showed Rawlings wild apricot and pear trees.<sup>88</sup> Through Rawlings's compensation and their own resourcefulness, the Mickens family ate comfortably.

Like many employers and domestic workers, Mickens and Rawlings clearly shared complicated emotional bonds of affection and dependence.<sup>89</sup> In a 1965 interview, Will Mickens depicted himself

82. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 320-22.

83. *Ibid.*, 238, 351.

84. *Ibid.*, 455, 635.

85. *Ibid.*, 327, 351.

86. Rawlings, *Cross Creek Cookery*, 184.

87. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 128, 234; Glisson, *The Creek*, 89, 144; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 332, 356, 373.

88. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 381-82.

89. Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 129-72.

and Martha Mickens as Rawlings's emotional support when her first husband, Charles Rawlings, left in 1934: "And there was the three of us a-standing there, with Missus Rawlings a-holding Mandy and the tears a-rolling down her face . . . [ellipses in original] and Old Martha is crying and I is crying . . . [ellipses in original] and Missus Rawlings she say: 'Hell. Damn it to hell.' And all three of us cried some mo'."<sup>90</sup> The scene is a compelling one: the abandoned woman and her two African American workers, standing loyally by her side. Will Mickens may have told this story to establish himself and Martha as Rawlings's intimates and enhance their stature at Cross Creek. The Mickenses were not yet living at Cross Creek full time. Another angle of this picture, however, is Rawlings's isolation from people off the farm and Mickens's proximity. According to J. T. Glisson, when Rawlings received the letter announcing that she had won the Pulitzer Prize, "there was no one around but Aunt Martha."<sup>91</sup> When there was no one else to tell, Martha Mickens was available.

According to Idella Parker, Martha Mickens was indeed dedicated to Rawlings: "It was obvious that she loved, cared for, and would do anything for, Mrs. Rawlings. She once said to me, 'Baby, you don't know. Me and her have been through many things.' She was referring, I'm sure, to the difficult times Mrs. Rawlings had had as she struggled to make a living before she sold her first book. By the time I arrived, Mrs. Rawlings had some money, for she had just sold the movie rights to her book *The Yearling*."<sup>92</sup> Parker believed that Martha Mickens occupied the most exalted position at Cross Creek: "She was Mrs. Rawlings' pet, her 'heartstrings.' She had been with Mrs. Rawlings for so many years that she had a sixth sense about when she would be needed. When she was down at the tenant house, she always kept an eye on the main house. From the front porch of the tenant house she could see straight across to the house, and she would come running anytime Mrs. Rawlings called, sometimes even before she called."<sup>93</sup> Mickens went about her days attuned to Rawlings's needs and desires and usually strove to fulfill them to the best of her ability.

Despite the affection between Rawlings and her workers, life at Cross Creek could be difficult. Even when she was sober, Rawlings

90. Smiley, "She Wept, Cussed as He Left."

91. Glisson, *The Creek*, 101.

92. Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 98-99.

93. Parker, *Idella*, 29.

had a short temper and a razor-sharp, profanity-laced tongue. On at least one occasion, she also had a .38 pistol. J. T. Glisson recalled one night when Rawlings returned from a trip and apparently found Adrenna Mickens and others consuming her supply of alcohol. She dispersed the revelers with numerous gunshots, and they ran to the Glisson house where J. T.'s father, Tom Glisson, allowed them to spend the night in the barn while Rawlings cooled off. Tom Glisson teased Adrenna Mickens and the others: "Y'all ain't scared of that little woman, are you?" Mickens replied, "Don't fun us. I is scared of her tongue and that thirty-eight special!" Rawlings did in fact show up the next morning to "get her help back." As Glisson observed, "her tantrums receded as fast as they rose."<sup>94</sup> In some ways, Rawlings's mercurial ways might have been even more difficult to endure than someone who was consistently abusive. Her employers tolerated successive waves of anger and affection, never knowing what to expect.

Marjorie Rawlings's own alcohol use and abuse created great strain at Cross Creek. Rawlings drank heavily, and that colored her relationships with her employees. In addition to asking the Mickens family to drink with guests, she also imbibed privately with Martha Mickens, writing in 1943: "When I got in last night, I invited Martha to have a drink with me. We got high as kites and swore undying loyalty. 'Old Martha will be here right on, Sugar.'<sup>95</sup> Rawlings did not record her own words of promise. Perhaps more than anyone else, Martha Mickens spoke candidly, although nonjudgmentally, about Rawlings's moods and her dependence on alcohol, which frequently led her to drive recklessly, to pass out at inopportune times, and to write and mail letters she later regretted. When J. T. Glisson's mother inquired about Rawlings's well-being, Mickens replied, "She's havin' one of her black spells, bless her heart."<sup>96</sup> Idella Parker observed that Mickens reported to Norton Baskin about Rawlings's attempts to cut down on her drinking: "I can see her now with that dip of snuff in her mouth, saying, 'Now Mr. Baskin, how you doing? Mrs. Rawlings is there, doing pretty good. She hasn't been sick for a long time.'<sup>97</sup> By 1952, Rawlings's attempts to

94. Glisson, *The Creek*, 95.

95. Parker, *Idella*, 80; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 96-98; Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 102, 224, 286, 462. "Sugar" was apparently Mickens's appellation for a number of people; she also referred to Parker as "Sugar" and "Baby," Parker, *Idella*, 29; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 98.

96. Glisson, *The Creek*, 90.

97. Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 153.



stop drinking led Mickens to pray on her employer's behalf. Rawlings wrote to Baskin: "I asked Martha to pray for me, and I did 'real good' Sunday, just had two small drinks in the evening. Monday and yesterday were beyond the pale, and I asked Martha if she quit praying after Sunday, and she said she had. I told her to get back on the job. . . ." Mickens prayed again in front of Rawlings, referring to her in prayer as "Mrs. Baskin."<sup>98</sup> Although Rawlings wrote humorously about the incident, as she did about most other topics, her drinking was a serious matter, and she hoped, in vain, that Mickens would somehow be able to help her stop it.

Whether it was to show her fidelity and genuine concern or to manipulate the allegiance of her workers, Rawlings made provisions in her will for Mickens and Parker. Parker clearly regarded the offer as coercion, for her share was conditional upon her remaining in Rawlings's employ, which she did not do. Mickens's part had no such contingency; apparently Rawlings believed (correctly) that she would remain at Cross Creek for the duration. The will, executed in December 1949, directed that Mickens receive five dollars a week and the use of the tenant house, rent free, with electricity and water, for the rest of her life. Mickens received this benefit until her death in 1960, and Will Mickens stayed in the tenant house on weekends until his death at age 102 in 1967.<sup>99</sup> Parker left three years before Rawlings died, and Rawlings added a codicil to her will, making doubly sure that Parker received no inheritance.<sup>100</sup> Mickens had proven her loyalty enough that Rawlings did not feel the need to qualify her bequest to make her stay at the farm.

That Martha Mickens possessed a strong personality was obvious to her neighbor, J. T. Glisson, who tellingly declared that she "made any meeting seem like the Second Coming, and she was the Messiah."<sup>101</sup> Despite Mickens's fealty to Rawlings, she often used the weapons at her disposal to make Rawlings aware of her feelings. One of those weapons was moodiness that Rawlings characterized

98. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 634.

99. Smiley, "'She Wept, Cussed as He Left'"; "'Ole Will' is dead; Rawlings' friend 102," undated clipping, file "Mickens," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida.

100. Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 142; Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Last Will and Testament, file "Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Last Will and Testament," Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Historic State Park, Cross Creek, Florida.

101. Glisson, *The Creek*, 145.

as “droopiness” or her “practically-at-death’s-door moods.” In the latter case, Mickens wanted transportation to help her daughter Estelle dress hogs, a favor which Rawlings refused, partially because of the gasoline rationing then in effect.<sup>102</sup> Mickens also acted in ways that Rawlings often interpreted as deliberate and subversive, and they may well have been.<sup>103</sup> Mickens sometimes performed her duties, particularly in the house, at a schedule that varied from that of Rawlings. In the absence of a cook, Mickens had meal preparation added to her morning chores of milking and feeding the cow and tending the chickens. When she arrived in the kitchen as early as 5:30, Mickens often made noise by turning on the stove and carelessly wielding pots and pans. Rawlings regarded this commotion as a type of aggression.<sup>104</sup> The two women struggled over the timing of Rawlings’s breakfast, with Mickens sometimes preparing food before Rawlings asked for it or occasionally waiting until Rawlings got herself up and dressed before preparing the meal.<sup>105</sup> One can easily imagine the resentment of the employee, up long before the employer chose to arise from her bed, and expressing her displeasure through deeds though never words.

From the distance of the tenant house, Mickens also completely ignored Rawlings on occasion. Her employer complained that she and her company had arrived “rather late” from fishing. “I wanted the fish when we got in last night, although it was rather late, as they are so much better when fresh out of the water, and I called loudly (and sweetly) to Martha as we came in. I don’t see how she could have helped hearing me, but she never appeared.”<sup>106</sup> Mickens was not just about to leave her house to fry fish for Rawlings and her guests, and pretending not to hear Rawlings call was an easy way to resist being on duty twenty-four hours a day. The fish and grits that Rawlings wanted simply had to wait a day. Doing things wrong also became a means of acting out for Mickens. Since Rawlings placed such an emphasis on superior table service, it galled her when Mickens prepared plates so precisely wrong as to appear to be doing it deliberately: “Last night our main dish was jellied chicken, and Martha heated the dinner plates to a crisp. Then Edith’s scrambled eggs this morning, and her toast, were served on

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102. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 53, 83, 222 362, 380, 442, 447.

103. *Ibid.*, 52, 381.

104. *Ibid.*, 111, 140-41, 225.

105. *Ibid.*, 289, 380.

106. *Ibid.*, 290.

clammy cold plates."<sup>107</sup> With sins both of omission and commission, Mickens managed to irritate her boss.

The contrast between Parker's abilities and those of the members of the Mickens family, as well as Rawlings's clear preference for Parker as cook, caused friction among all of the women at Cross Creek, black and white. Parker came and left three times between 1940 and 1950. Each time she left, a Mickens daughter filled in, and each time Parker returned, the Mickens daughter found herself without work. This situation created considerable tension for Martha Mickens, who wanted her daughters to succeed. Rawlings, however, expected Martha Mickens to extend a warm welcome to Parker each time she returned and threatened to dismiss all of the Mickenses if they were unkind to Parker.<sup>108</sup> Rawlings knew exactly the situation she was creating and made sure that the daughters were not bereft when they left her employ. For example, in 1943, Rawlings assured herself that Sissie would be getting her late husband Henry's military pension as well as working for the Brice family and so would be all right.<sup>109</sup> Each time an opening appeared at Cross Creek, Mickens made sure that either Sissie or Adrenna was standing by, ready to fill the void. Finally, in 1952, after Parker had been gone two years and Rawlings was trying to lure her back yet one more time, Mickens stood up to Rawlings in her daughter's defense. Rawlings wrote, "Martha said firmly and reprovingly, 'Adrenna come here for the 'spress purpose of he'ping you and keeping me company. She told the Williams right off that when you come back, she was working for *you*.'"<sup>110</sup> Adrenna had left a steady job to come back to Cross Creek, and her mother was determined that she would not be left in the lurch again. Her appeal worked, and Parker did not return to Rawlings's household.

Rawlings played Martha Mickens and Parker off one another, as each sought to maintain her standing with their employer, even at the expense of the other. For Mickens, that meant mainly looking out for her children as best she could. Parker enjoyed special privileges, such as better lodging than the Mickenses, frequent use of Rawlings's car, and the knowledge that she would likely be re-

107. *Ibid.*, 380, 557.

108. *Ibid.*, 121, 147-48, 175, 178-79, 444, 624, 631; Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 212.

109. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 200-201.

110. *Ibid.*, 631. According to J. T. Glisson, Mickens "decided who among the blacks at Cross Creek worked for whom and where they lived," Glisson, *The Creek*, 135-36, but evidently Rawlings took an active hand in placement as well.

hired each time she took off. Indeed, Rawlings never fired Parker; each time she left, it was of her own volition. Parker deliberately held herself apart from the Mickens clan, commenting that she had more "sense" than they did.<sup>111</sup> Parker disdained their amusements, refusing to join Little Will and Alberta in their visits to nearby juke joints and disapproving of the Mickens family's sharing drinks with Rawlings's guests.<sup>112</sup> The two employees circled one another, noting each other's flaws and vulnerabilities. Although Parker reported that Mickens was kind to her, Mickens watched for errors on Parker's part and maintained a "smug air" when the cook slipped.<sup>113</sup> Parker likewise criticized Mickens's work, silently noting her disapproval of how Mickens lit the fires in the morning and her carelessness in cooking eggs.<sup>114</sup> Yet Parker needed Mickens and her knowledge to live successfully at Cross Creek, and Mickens gave her the information that she needed, whether grudgingly or freely. The Mickens women apparently seldom competed with one another, even when their men were engaged in mortal struggles. Only once did Sissie Fountain complain. Left with all of the chores at Cross Creek when her mother went to nurse Adrenna in St. Petersburg, she doubted that her older sister was suffering from anything more serious than menopause, according to Rawlings.<sup>115</sup> And Martha Mickens sometimes became tired of having a houseful of small children.<sup>116</sup> Overall, however, mother and sisters stuck together.

Mickens's closeness to Rawlings sometimes made other workers, particularly Parker, uncomfortable around her. Mickens inserted herself into situations where she was neither needed nor wanted, on one occasion showing up unexpected and with no explanation, to help Parker serve a dinner for company. Her presence made Parker feel that Rawlings did not trust her, even after six years of employment.<sup>117</sup> Parker evidently regarded Mickens as sort of a spy for their employer, and with just cause, for Mickens did serve as reporter about the neighbors and other workers to Rawl-

111. Parker, *Idella*, 35.

112. Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 92; Parker, *Idella*, 40, 80-81.

113. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 422. Mickens also remained alert for opportunities for her son, Little Will Mickens. She arranged for him to have the job which his brother-in-law, Samson, vacated after Henry Fountain shot him in 1939, Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 212.

114. Parker, *Idella*, 27-28; Parker, *From Reddick to Cross Creek*, 90.

115. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 305.

116. *Ibid.*, 181, 183.

117. *Ibid.*, 462.



Martha and Will Mickens in their later years. *Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.*

ings. Mickens did laundry for Rawling's neighbor, Marsh Turner, and also observed and told about his activities. "Almost every Monday morning," Rawlings wrote, Mickens had "a racy account of his Saturday night drunk."<sup>118</sup> Mickens carried news from the outside world back to Cross Creek. While picking beans in Fairfield, about

<sup>118</sup> Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 149; Glessner, *The Creek*, 90.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol89/iss4/7>

twenty miles from the Creek, she encountered Rawling's former cook named Mary. Mary, she told Rawlings, "sent her love to you."<sup>119</sup> Mickens in particular served as an interlocutor between Parker and Rawlings, receiving letters from Parker and sending them to Rawlings without Parker's permission, and reporting to Rawlings on Parker's whereabouts when she went missing. She even went to Parker's family home in Reddick in 1943 and gave Rawlings a report on Parker's departure for New York based on her conversations with Parker's relatives.<sup>120</sup> By sharing Parker's information with Rawlings, Mickens clearly indicated that she sided with Rawlings, not with Parker, in the ongoing disputes between the two.

And yet, in the end, Mickens's loyalty may have been not to Rawlings but to Cross Creek itself. In 1945, she was in her mid-seventies and her back was causing her ongoing, significant pain. She told Rawlings that she had been to the "doctor and the witch woman" and gotten no relief. She proposed that she and Will Mickens move to St. Petersburg with their daughter Adrenna. Rawlings called her bluff: "I said of course she must go if she wanted to, but if or when she did, I should also of course have to close up the place entirely and not come back, and sell the cows and pigs and ducks and chickens." Rawlings reported that Mickens "gave a little start and said, well, she'd just rock on a while and maybe she would feel better."<sup>121</sup> Rawlings did not indicate whether she really meant what she said; if so, her equation of Mickens with Cross Creek was total: without Mickens, there would be no Cross Creek. Or perhaps Rawlings was bluffing herself, but it was Rawlings who ultimately won the standoff. Threatening to sell the animals and the land that the Mickenses had occupied off and on for half a century was enough to keep Mickens right where Rawlings wanted her, which was Cross Creek. Despite her physical pain, Mickens could not abide the idea of her animals and Cross Creek being sold, and on the next day she told Rawlings that she intended to stay right there and take care of the bounty of baby pigs.<sup>122</sup>

And so Martha Mickens remained, while Rawlings did not. Throughout the late 1940s, Rawlings spent an increasing amount of time at her new house in Van Hornesville, New York. Idella

119. Rawlings, *Cross Creek*, 144-45.

120. Rawlings, *Private Marjorie*, 121, 125, 183-84, 567, 570.

121. *Ibid.*, 231, 241, 447.

122. *Ibid.*, 448.

Parker left for good in 1950, and Adrenna Mickens returned to Cross Creek to cook for Rawlings during the months that she was in Florida. When Rawlings died suddenly in December 1953, Cross Creek passed to the University of Florida, then to the state of Florida as part of a state historic park. Under the terms of Rawling's will, Martha Mickens stayed at Cross Creek and received her pension for the rest of her life. Martha Mickens died in 1960 and Will Mickens followed in 1964; they were buried in unmarked graves near Boardman, Florida, across Orange Lake from Cross Creek.<sup>123</sup> The orange groves died in a series of severe freezes in the 1950s.<sup>124</sup> Through her work, Martha Mickens purchased security for herself and her husband in their old age, if not for her entire family. She perceived Cross Creek to be her best option in a world constrained by racism and poverty, and she strove to maximize her benefits and those of her children and her children's children.

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123. Gary Kirkland, "Family Finally Gets Its Due: Funds from the Rawlings Society Help Purchase a Granite Headstone that Bears Their Names," *Gainesville Sun*, April 17, 1996.

124. Laurie, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 6.