

Benedetto/Gallo

# The Spanish River Papers

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"It was wild and beautiful then, like some foreign, tropical land, far from the city we see today.

Diane Benedetto in  
"Childhood Memories"

A report to the membership of  
**Boca Raton Historical Society, Inc.**

P.O. Box 1113 • Boca Raton, Florida 33432

From Mrs. Edward Dobbin, Mrs. John A. Truesdell

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CHILDHOOD MEMORIES - - Diane Benedetto, nee Imogene Alice Gates

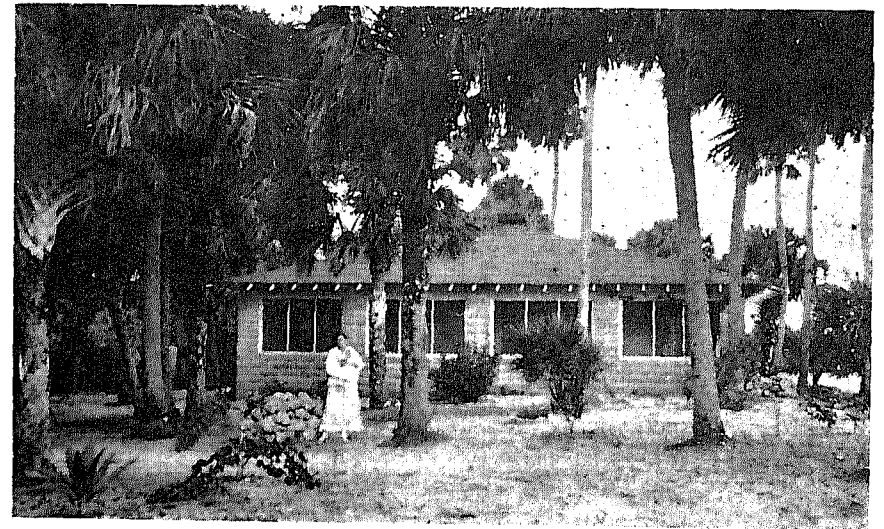


Imogene Alice, Harriet & Harley "Buddy" Gates

My earliest memories of this little town are of hot sunlit days spent roaming over the many acres of the Palmetto Park Plantation and running across the sugar white sands in search of childish adventures.

I was born at dawn on an April morning. The whippoorwills were singing and the scent of jasmine filled the air. The First World War had ended and there was peace in the world at last. I was actually born in West Palm Beach as we had no hospitals or doctors here. A few days later I was brought home, so I always say I was born in Boca Raton. It seems more rightly descriptive as I spent my early days here.

At the time of my birth, my father owned twenty-three to twenty-eight acres of land on which stood an East Indian bungalow. He farmed and raised vegetables, citrus, bananas, and all kinds of rare fruit and flowering trees which he grew as an experiment for the government.



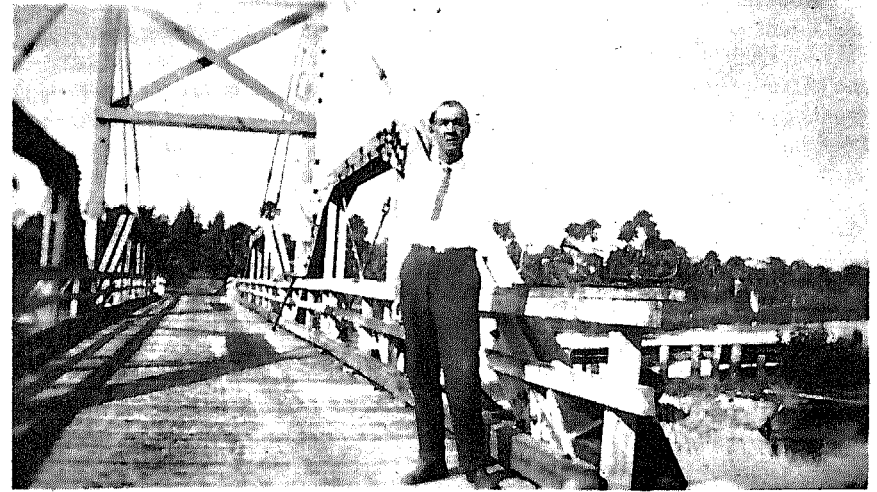
Palmetto Park Plantation - 1916  
Mrs. Gates holding Imogene Alice

The plantation stood on the north side of Palmetto Park Road by the bridge. The road was named by my father after his plantation. It was wild and beautiful then, like some foreign, tropical land, far from the city we see today. Across the canal was a lovely lagoon where white heron fished for minnows among the tiger lillies that grew wild along the banks beneath oaks covered with Spanish moss. It is my favorite memory, that lovely peaceful lagoon. I sat on the banks, filled with wonder, watching the fiddler crabs. I would walk among them, trying to catch one for Pete, my pet coon. Pete would wash it in the canal, then scurry among them trying to catch another. As soon as he caught one, he would wash it and eat it with great relish. I tried to eat one once, but it was not as good as Pete had led me to think. Our tastes were different, that is, unless we were stealing the workmen's lunches. They put their lunches in a lard pail up on a post so the ants wouldn't get them. The ants didn't but we did. I told Pete to go get them and he would scurry up the post and knock one down. I would open it and we would devour the contents of chicken, biscuit, cornbread, and salt pork. Many a workman must have wondered what happened to his lunch!

Sometimes in the clear stillness of the day I would hear the faint sound of a boat whistle blowing and my heart would beat with excitement as I shouted, "Boat coming. Boat coming." I would race off to the bridge and try to unanchor it, but mostly I just got in the way. Then I would try to help put the turnstile up and turn it. When the boat approached I would run to the side of the bridge and hang over the rail and yell, "hi," and wave as the boat passed through. There were not too many boats in those days. That was lucky as the bridge was a "Seven day wonder." The bridge tender lived in a two-room wooden house built up on pilings over the northeast end of the bridge.

The first bridge tender I remember was Mr. Townsend who had a wife named Liza. I remember her because she was cross-eyed and that fascinated me. You could never tell which way she was looking. Mr. Townsend had a big gold watch chain across his big stomach, with a gold watch he kept in his watch pocket. It had a fob you could pull it out by. They reminded me of an old tintype. We called her Aunt Liza, for everyone was aunt or uncle in those days as there were only about fifteen families in the area. I remember one time Aunt Liza invited us to dinner. She served a delicious stew which we really enjoyed until she told us it was wildcat. That made us feel a bit squeamish though I can't imagine why as we ate just about anything that walked or swam, it was shot or caught and put in the pot.

Then one day the Townsends moved away and a new bridge tender came bringing his wife and two children. The girl was a year older and the boy younger than I was. They were my first playmates and it was with great joy I welcomed their arrival. The bridge tender's name was Lucas Douglas and he became one of my best friends. The Douglasses were from South Carolina and my people were Yankees from Vermont, but we got along beautifully. I found their way of life far more exciting than ours. They had a little house out back while our family had a bathroom. We also had a car and a telephone while they rode bicycles, had mule teams, or walked.



Lucas Douglas & the first bridge

Every night at the bridge there was a fire built and benches of timbers and logs set up around it. The older townspeople would sit there for a few hours after supper and recount the events of the day, the town gossip and news of the world as they knew it. I would give anything to hear some of those discussions there by the fire so many years ago. Lucas Douglas was the source of all information and I used to think he was the wisest man I ever knew. He knew everything and everybody. He didn't have a lot of schooling but he had a great mind and he read his Bible, the newspaper and heard all the gossip. His world there by the river was the center and heartbeat of Boca Raton. His wife, Bessie, was a pretty woman. I can see her now with her long dark hair and dark eyes. She was a mountain girl and walked like a ballerina. She died quite young of a heart attack and Lucas raised his children alone. There was a time he even took me into his care when no one would have wanted the responsibility. It takes a pretty wonderful man to do that when he barely had enough to take care of his own.

The only way to get to our town was by train and you never knew where you might be let off, baggage and all. The train just slowed down and you jumped off with your luggage thrown off after you. You got it home the best you could. It wasn't much fun hauling a trunk across the hot sand in ninety degree weather, but that was it or leave it there. The same train brought the mail and they would snatch the mail bag off the post and throw our mail in a bag out the door to the ground.

The train depot stood on the east side of the railroad tracks off Palmetto Park Road. There was a boardwalk from the west side that led up the track to a little office where there was a wireless and a mail post. We used to play there, sitting on the bales of hay watching the trains go by. That was one of the few exciting moments of the day. We would see the people in the coaches heading for Miami and yearned to share such an adventure. One day we finally did and it wasn't as much fun as it looked. The coaches were hot and you were covered with cinders that would get into your eyes and they were not easy to get out.

A man came around selling fruit and if we were lucky Mother would buy us an apple or a pear. I could hardly wait for him to come around again but I think Mother used to wish he would fall off somewhere along the track, and quick! We brought along a shoe box with our lunch and no sooner were we on the train than we were ready to eat so we could have a soft drink that the porter was selling. We were pretty grouchy by the time we reached Jacksonville where we were to get a ship that sailed to New York. Then we took a train to Vermont where we spent the summer.

It was good to get away from the hot summers as we had no air-conditioning then. There wasn't even any electricity for a fan. Another summer problem was mosquitos. Nothing seemed to discourage them. Only the Seminoles were smart enough to outwit them by rubbing themselves with skunk oil. Evidently the white men could stand the odor less than the mosquitos so they suffered. I remember Gramma Davis going out to pick huckleberries with me and she would wrap newspapers around her legs with rubber bands and she did look funny. Oh yes, those were the "good old days" you hear so much about.

Another exciting day would be the day the new Sears and Roebuck catalogue came in the mail. The old one would end up in the little house out back, if you had one, where it hung on the wall. It served two purposes, one was amusement and the other sanitation. We used to spend hours looking through the new catalogue, turning each page with anticipation as we would try to cover some admired object with our hands and yell, "mine, I saw it first." We had some stiff arguments over staking claims and often someone went home in a huff, but that new catalogue was a big thrill to us for weeks. We sometimes cut the figures out for paper dolls, but it better not be a new book or someone would get tanned.

If we were good and lucky we would get a chance to go up to the Bijou Movie House in Delray. A silent movie was all we had in those days. Sometimes the reel would break or they would get the reel in upside down, but that only added to the fun. We would sit there and laugh and joke about it. A movie would last us for weeks and sometimes years. At night we would all congregate at the bridge house and sit on the bed recounting the movies in our own words with plenty of embellishments. That made it better and kept the same old stories interesting.

We used to eat at each other's houses. There was always food on the table; salt pork and biscuits or cornbread. We'd grab a handful and run out and play again. If it were dinner time we just took it for granted we were invited and sat down to a table laden with biscuits, sorghum, grits, rice, mashed potatoes, pork

chops, tripe, vegetables of all kinds and iced tea. I remember mostly everyone canning vegetables, jams and jellies as there was only a general store in those days. It carried dried goods plus staples such as flour, rice, corn meal, tea and salt, but not many canned foods as they were not as safe as they are today or as plentiful. But the general store did sell candy and Cracker Jack. It was such a treat to get a Cracker Jack with a prize in it.

Another place of interest was the Raulerson House. It still stands today. I remember visiting the two girls that lived there, Ivy and Myrtle Lee. Their table was always loaded with food for anyone who visited them at any time of the day.



The Raulerson House

Mr. Raulerson was a farmer. His farms were west of town and we children used to love to go out there. It was different from our place. There were endless fields of beans, peppers, eggplants, cucumbers and so forth. Our place looked more like a garden in comparison, as we grew only small patches of vegetables, the rest were fruit trees and experimental plants.

Some days we would go fishing out on the ocean. I would look through a glass bottom bucket while daddy fished. We would have to come in at the beginning of the tide or we would come flying in and end up on the shore at the inlet. It took experience to know the ways of the sea and my father knew it well. Maneuvering the inlet was very dangerous for the inexperienced, just as it is today.



My father the fisherman

Once Pete, my racoon, went with us and he got seasick. Before we got home he got out of the boat and we didn't see him for days. He never went near the boat again.

We lived on fish most of the time for they were plentiful in those days. My father loved fishing and, as long as he was able, he was on the beach day and night.

There were certain days set aside when southern people cleaned house and it was like no house cleaning you see today. The houses were up on posts and the floors were wooden. A broom, Octagon Soap Powder, and a bucket of water did the trick. They would scrub the floor with soap powder and water until it was spotless then rinse with water and sweep it out the door, what didn't run through the cracks.

Then there was wash day. The clothes were washed first, then that being finished, they put the kids in the wash tubs and scrubbed us too. Wash day served a double purpose.

School days were spent in the first school house, located near where the police station stands today. The school was a small, one-room wooden frame building. Classes and church services were held there. I did not attend this first school, as I was too young, but I did attend the school that still stands (much larger) on Southwest First Avenue.



Boca Raton School - 1915

My best friend was Masuko Kamiya, a Japanese girl, who lived up in Yamato. Her family lived as they had in Japan. At night they slept on pads; they had no beds. They also ate with chopsticks. I wish I could have seen my face when they handed me those things the first time. They did find a fork for me or I would surely have starved. We used to eat rice, seaweed, fish and other items I can't even begin to describe. I was polite and ate everything and never said a word about it. Masuko was the same when she visited me. She had many brothers and sisters and her parents were so wonderful to me. She was very smart and talented. I wasn't, but I learned much from Masuko that I couldn't have learned from anyone else. Their house was on stilts like all other southern houses and it was big and rambling. Masuko's father was a farmer. All the Japanese families farmed and they were excellent at it.

When I was eleven, I was sent away to boarding school. I came home summers but somehow my world had changed into a world where I had to learn to accept discipline. No more freedom as I had known it before moving to Miami and having to go to school. I longed with all my heart to be back on the plantation, but that time was gone and even though we did live on the plantation many summers, it was never the same.

#### Selected Remembrances of things Past

"Old Betsy," the original fire engine, still exists today. She is a symbol of this town as far back as I can remember. She made a grand appearance the night the beach houses burned down. Everyone was there dressed in night clothes and wrappers. The fire was raging in the wind from the sea and Old Betsy came poking along making a huge amount of noise. All the gallant men were flying in the breeze back of her hanging on for dear life. Everyone was chatting excitedly, wondering if Old Betsy and her brave men would be able to subdue the fire. Old Betsy stopped short, backed up and ran off the road into the sand. With a roar of the engine, she was put into gear to go forward . . . nothing happened . . . try as they might she would not budge.

The flames roared higher, people stood back and panic was in the hearts of those watching. The houses were burning to the ground. Then someone realized there was no place to attach the hose for water even if they did get her out. There was one house not yet touched by the fire, the old Nelson house. Several men rushed in to save the valuables that could be saved. Luckily the wind was from the northeast and that saved the Nelson house. But the men had already gone in and thrown books out the windows, torn the bookcases apart, and pitched glasses and bedclothes out, just about everything came out but the valuables. It was just as well because the house never did catch fire but there was a pretty mess in that house those gallant men had tried to save.

Another exciting event was the day the whale first washed ashore. It was a female with a baby nursing. I felt such compassion for those creatures. The mother was dying, if not already dead. When the men were sure she was dead they

dragged her out to sea but she washed ashore again. They stood around discussing what to do for a few days while the smell began to cover the town. It was unbearable so a decision had to be made. Some wise man got the brilliant idea to dynamite the whale and bury it. Need I tell you what a mess that was? The whale went flying everywhere and the smell intensified. The stench lasted a long time, but bit by bit the whale was buried, carried to sea, or disposed of in any way the townspeople could devise.

One winter we heard the Shriners were going to Miami for a convention. Boca Raton was never heard of at that time and it used to really annoy us that no one knew where or who we were. The Commissioners had a meeting and this problem was discussed. The idea was born to create a camel, the Shriner's symbol, that would arch the entry to Boca Raton. My father wrote a poem about it that will explain the impact it must have had on all who saw it. We were all so proud of the camel. It was so successful to us that when the Elks came another year, the townspeople built an elk across the highway. Imagine doing that now?

### THE CAMEL

A poem written by Mrs. Benedetto's father,  
H.D. Gates, to commemorate the commissioners' folly.

*Towering above the Dixie Highway  
Unhampered by federal aid  
Stands the stately and lordly camel  
Sponsored by our Board of Trade*

*Now they gaze in awe upon it  
As they pass through our beautiful city  
This emblem of Shrinedom and glory  
Oh boys! But it's certainly pretty!*

*What hours of labor have wrought it  
It's a marvel of industry, fellers,  
Passed by the Board of Censorship,  
Headed by our engineer, Sellers.*

*Think you those Nobles will miss it?  
Think your efforts in vain?  
As sure as the world they will see it  
And the engineer will stop the train.*

*That smell, don't blame it on the camel  
We know camels are smelly and all  
But that odor is not from the camel  
It comes from City Hall.*

*Pause and think of the many and many  
Of tax encumbered women and men,  
Each bearing this camel's burden  
Maybe you will appreciate it then*

*A camel is strong and sturdy  
On his back carries the burden of many  
And when it comes to bearing the taxes  
Our camel don't carry a penny.*

*Some think it cost too much money,  
Speak of graft and commissions, Oh shucks!  
We can't build camels for nothing,  
After all what is a thousand bucks!*

*When I see that long procession  
Hear the cheers of the Nobles that burst  
At the sight of this emblem of dryness  
And know of their terrible thirst.*

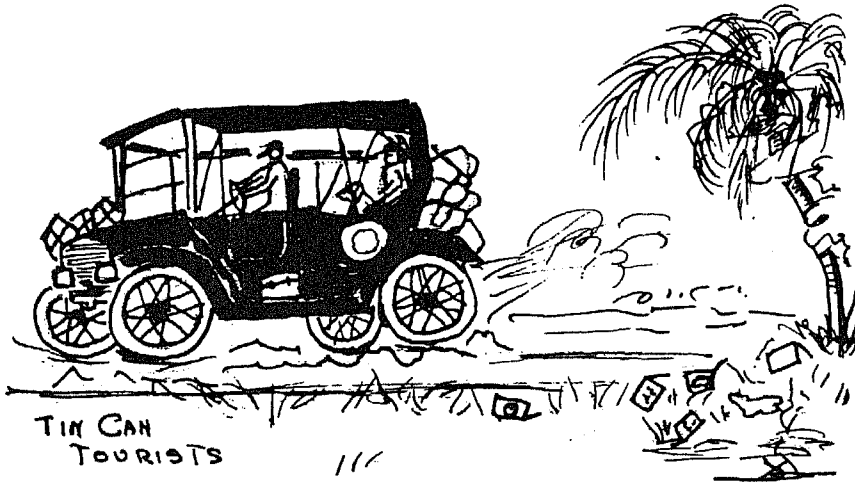
*I know that forever and forever  
As long as the world rolls past  
As long as the Shriners have conventions  
As long as the memory shall last.*

*Our camel and its majestic impressions  
In this memory will stand all alone.  
As a symbol of fitness and progress  
For the commissioners of Boca Raton.*

### TIN CAN TOURISTS

Every winter the tin can tourists would come down in their old Model T Fords, loaded with tents and canned goods. The women wore those horrible knickers with sailor middy blouses in khaki. They would park their cars any place that looked like a good camp spot, unload their paraphernalia, and dig out their can openers. They put up tents or built palm frond shacks. There were many cases of ptomaine poisoning among these tourists as they did not have any way of keeping their food cold. Some did have ice boxes but it was not easy to get ice. Ice was shipped in on the train and it melted sometimes before you could get it, so many had to manage without it and the heat was so intense things would sometimes spoil within an hour. I don't remember if these tourists were resented or not. I imagine they were more of a curiosity than anything. At least they didn't leave any unpleasant litter around as our tourists today do.

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These are just a few of the many funny stories one could tell about those early times. Maybe in the future I will find a way to put more of these memories into words and add them to this account.

Imogene Alice Gates is the daughter of one of the pioneer landowners in Boca Raton. Her father, H.D. Gates, came to Florida in 1907 from Vermont. He settled here permanently in 1914 when he built a small bungalow for his family on the Palmetto Park Plantation.

Imogene Alice lived here through the eighth grade after which she attended boarding school in Orlando and then pursued a theatrical career in Miami.

She returned to Boca Raton in 1965 as Diane Benedetto, wife of Joseph Benedetto. They subsequently opened the "Chez Joey" restaurant. It was during this recent period that Mrs. Benedetto began writing the memoirs of "Imogene Alice."

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