

**Harry A. Kersey, Jr..** *The Stranahans of Fort Lauderdale: A Pioneer Family of New River*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. xvii + 98 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2666-4.



**Reviewed by** William E. McGoun

**Published on** H-Florida (December, 2003)

## Fort Lauderdale's First Family

Frank Stranahan arrived in New River in 1893 to run the overnight camp on the Lantana-Lemon City stage line, thus becoming the first non-Indian to live in what now is the center of Fort Lauderdale. Ivy Cromartie arrived six years later as the tiny settlement's first schoolteacher and promptly won Stranahan's heart. She would live to see that frontier outpost become a major city. He would not.

History professor Harry A. Kersey Jr. has done an admirable job in telling the story of the Stranahans, which in a larger sense is the story of Fort Lauderdale. Frank Stranahan was an acknowledged political, civic, and business leader of the city during its first two decades. Ivy Stranahan was an activist for temperance and for the rights of women and Native Americans for more than half a century.

Kersey avoids treating the Stranahans as either saints or sinners. He refrains from judging them by the standards of the twenty-first century, while recognizing that some of their attitudes would be considered unfortunate today. "Al-

though Frank and Ivy were noted for their involvement with both Indians and African-Americans, many of their activities could be viewed as paternalistic or even patronizing by contemporary social standards. Certainly they made no effort to break down the segregationist racial and political barriers that prevented minorities from full participation in Fort Lauderdale community life" (p. xvi).

Kersey draws a portrait of Frank Stranahan as a Shakespearean tragic hero, a giant of a man brought down by a flaw. "He was essentially an investor and entrepreneur; however, in a broader sense he became the leading promoter and booster of a fledgling settlement on New River..." (p. 99). "[H]is public-spirited nature and interest in Fort Lauderdale and its citizens of all races is undeniable" (p. 114). The only reason he didn't get a seat on the first council when Fort Lauderdale was incorporated in 1911 was because he didn't seek one.

Yet he was a very private man, and to some an unfriendly one. Kersey quotes pioneer Fort Lauderdale lawyer Carl Hiaasen, grandfather of

the novelist of the same name, as reportedly saying, "Mr. Stranahan was taciturn, unfriendly to the point of not seeming to have any friends" (p. 149). To most of those who knew him, however, he was simply a quiet and private person. Kersey quotes Stranahan neighbor Bob Hall as saying, "He didn't want publicity, he just didn't want it" (p. 149).

At the same time, he would speak out sharply if he felt wronged. When he believed a local newspaper had withheld information about the opportunity to get a Coast Guard station for Fort Lauderdale in order to hurt him politically, he said so in strident terms (pp. 106-107). Upon losing in the 1926 city elections he said he did not "believe that Jesus Christ and his 12 apostles could straighten out the people of Fort Lauderdale and get them on the road to prosperity" (p. 153).

Finally, he had his demons. He appears to have had both physical and mental problems. Were he alive today, he probably would be diagnosed with clinical depression. "[T]here was a time when Ivy Stranahan became deeply concerned over Frank's lethargic attitude and general disinterest in civic affairs" (p. 152). On May 20, 1929, longtime business associate W.C. Kyle wrote that "Mr. Stranahan has been in the hospital for about 10 days with a nervous breakdown..." (p. 155).

Kyle's letter was addressed to the Bank of Bay Biscayne. Like every other businessman in Broward County, Frank Stranahan was in a deep hole due to the collapse of the 1920s land boom and the 1926 hurricane. Unlike the others, he could not bear up. "On April 9, Frank wrote poignantly in his private notebook, 'My wife gave me much encouragement but I can't seem to grasp it'" (p. 155).

Two days after Kyle's letter, Frank Stranahan tied a heavy grate to his foot with a rope and committed suicide by jumping into New River (p. 157).

Ivy Stranahan had none of Frank's self-doubts. She outlived her husband for more than

four decades, putting his tangled financial house in order. She was a state leader in the ultimately futile efforts of the Florida Federation of Woman's Clubs and the Florida Equal Suffrage Association to gain for women the right to vote through state action (pp. 118-124). She founded Friends of the Seminoles and was instrumental in getting the Indians to accept their reservation west of Dania Beach (pp. 135-136, 139). She was a key player in the successful effort to protect the Seminoles from termination of federal benefits in the 1950s (pp. 140-144).

And she was a powerful guardian of her husband's reputation. After the first black headlines, the word suicide "was not used again in published accounts of Stranahan's death, during his widow's lifetime. It seems that Ivy Stranahan totally rejected the term" (p. 156).

Her influence in that regard continued to be felt after she died in 1971. The following year, as I was preparing the series of Miami Herald articles that would become *A Biographic History of Broward County*, I went to the old Fort Lauderdale Historical Society offices in Holiday Park to ask Florence Hardy for information. She made me wait and went into the back room, emerging with a manila folder that she handed to me.

Inside was a copy of the first-day story, with its black headline announcing Stranahan's suicide. Mrs. Hardy cautioned me, "Don't tell anyone where you got this." Thus was the power of Ivy Stranahan's will, even from the grave.

In addition to the most extensive report of the suicide yet, Kersey lays to rest the common belief that both Stranahans were teetotalers. While it is true that Ivy Stranahan was strongly opposed to drinking and that Frank would not sell liquor to Indians, nevertheless, as Kersey puts it, "Frank was known to imbibe on occasion.... [A] small stash of liquor bottles was found when the attic of their house was cleaned out ... in January 1980" (p. 116).

The manager of Pioneer House, the restaurant that was operated on the ground floor of the Stranahan home from 1939 to 1979, once told me Frank would stagger home after drinking with the Indians and make his way unsteadily up the back staircase while Ivy was entertaining her temperance friends in the parlor. I'm sure that account was embellished, but the point is that Frank drank more than Ivy let on.

Also, Kersey provides a lot more detail about New River in the nineteenth century than has appeared previously. Other accounts tend to say little about the nearly six decades between the massacre of William Cooley's family by Seminoles in 1836 and the arrival of Frank Stranahan in 1893.

At this point, it is the duty of every reviewer to pick a few nits. In the case of this book, they are very few. Marjory Stoneman Douglas's first name is spelled "Marjorie" (p. 120). Kersey says Von D. Mizell got his medical degree in Chicago (p. 126), but Mizell told me he went to Meharry Medical School in Nashville.

Finally, Kersey's assertion that Florida's last vote on female suffrage was cast in 1919 (p. 124) is sort of half right. In 1969 the legislature finally passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, forty-nine years after it had gone into effect with the necessary three-fourths of the states signing on.

The only typographic error I saw was a "Stranhan" on page 155.

To sum up, I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in Fort Lauderdale history, the Stranahans, or simply an engaging tale of two outstanding people who were nevertheless human. Kersey concludes his book by saying, "I hope this work adequately reflects a community's appreciation of the legacy that Frank and Ivy Stranahan left for all Floridians" (p. 167).

It does.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

**Citation:** William E. McGoun. Review of Kersey, Harry A., Jr. *The Stranahans of Fort Lauderdale: A Pioneer Family of New River*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. December, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8537>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.