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James M. Denham, Canter Brown Jr.., eds. *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives: The Florida Reminiscences of George Gillet Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000. x + 215 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57003-512-8; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-346-9.

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Beginning with the release of Frank Owsley's seminal study on the plain folk of the Old South over half a century ago, scholars have sought to bring to light the lives of the everyday people of the region.[1] Loosely defined as the social tier above blacks and below affluent planters, the plain folk made up the majority of the South's population in the nineteenth century. In Florida, a frontier for most of that era, these individuals played aM important role in the historical events. Mostly emigrants from Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, they weathered two bloody Indian wars and the Civil War, as well as the difficult period that followed. All the while, these individuals steadily pushed the American frontier southward into the peninsula.

Few historians have studied the life and times of Florida's frontier people in more depth than have Canter Brown, Jr., and James M. Denham. Experts on nineteenth-century Florida, the two recently collaborated to publish the reminiscences of pioneers George Gillet Keen and Sarah Pamela Williams. A welcome addition to the ever-expanding catalog of Florida history, this collection of annotated primary sources also makes a significant contribution to Southern studies in general. Historians, anthropologists, genealogists, and the general reader will find Keen and Williams's reminiscences of the pioneer days of Florida fascinating and their insights into the frontier way of life informative.

The reminiscences of Keen and Williams were previously far from the reach of scholars and we are indebted to Brown and Denham for making them readily available. Keen's writings were buried deep in the pages of the *Lake City Florida Index* newspaper. Born in Georgia, he came to northern Florida with his family in the early 1830s and remained there his entire life. Between 1899 and his death in 1902, the aging Floridian submitted numerous letters to the publication under the pseudonym of "Black Eye." His colorful anecdotes of the territorial and early statehood days touch on a wide range of issues that were important to antebellum Southerners, from slavery to honor. He was one of very few pioneer Floridians who recorded his memories for posterity.

Throughout his recollections, Keen makes reference to hundreds of early Floridians. Brown and Denham conducted extensive background research on these individuals that led to the unexpected discovery of Williams's memoirs, which were in the possession of a descendant. Williams, another pioneer and a Florida native, came of age in roughly the same time period as Keen. Being a woman and more well-off than Keen, her recollections of life on the northern Florida frontier often are quite different from those of her counterpart. Nonetheless, the editors chose to present her reminiscences alongside of Keen's in order to illustrate the diverse experience of Florida pioneers.

Keen's distinct brand of Southern humor will delight many readers, as will Williams's simple but beautiful images of Florida as she knew it. The editors have generally refrained from using "*sic*" to indicate misspellings, and thus the colloquialisms of Florida's frontier people are alive and well in the text. For reasons of education, the editors also made no effort to omit racial epithets that ring offensive to our modern ears. Paragraph breaks have been introduced now and then for clarity, but Brown and Denham have, for the most part, remained loyal to the original appearance of the writings.

With little interruption, the editors guide the reader through Keen and Williams's stories. The brief introduction to the book provides ample background information on nineteenth-century Florida and the lives of Keen and Williams. Each chapter also begins with a prelude from the editors that allows for a smooth transition into the text that follows.

Part 1, the largest section of the book, consists of Keen's recollections. Stylistically speaking, his humorous stories mesh well with the work of Mark Twain and other Southern writers, as the editors point out. Fron-

tier Florida as Keen knew it was an exciting and dramatic place. As elsewhere in the antebellum South, honor played an important role in Florida society. Keen shows how sometimes a perceived affront could lead to physical altercation, such as when Silas Overstreet confronted Bill Hart on the grounds that "Columbia County was too small to afford two Bullies..." (p. 20). Memories of the political culture of the old days feature frequently in Keen's reminiscences. Even in places as small as Lake City and as remote as Benton (now Hernando) County, the Whig-Democrat debate sparked rivalries. Interesting, too, are Keen's observations on the differences between politics in the territorial days and in the late 1890s.

Keen includes much information on the everyday life of common folk like himself. Descriptions of diet, clothing, and housing are plentiful here, as are observations on courtship, marriage, and social status. The reader often finds Keen yearning for the simpler days of his youth. "I said in the beginning, that the people lived the best in them days that I ever saw people live in my life..." (p. 24).

Keen's remembrances become bitter when he recalls the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), the most important event in Florida's territorial period. As might be expected, he harbors no sympathy for the Seminole when he relates the numerous raids they conducted on North Florida homesteads. From Keen's often gruesome recollections, the reader gets a strong sense of how this conflict marked the lives of civilians. It seems there was hardly a family in Florida that this long war did not affect in some way. Such an illustration of the common settler's experience of the Second Seminole War is difficult to find in the existing literature on the subject.

Part 2 of *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives* is Williams's short autobiographical account. A novel piece of literature like Keen's, her memoir offers us the rare perspective of a Florida frontier woman. Her father was John Lee Williams, a noted Floridian and author of two books on the territory. Educated and sophisticated, she did not identify with the rough-and-tumble "Crackers" as did Keen but they do appear in her recollections. The editors note that she interacted with them on a regular basis. However, her observations of these individuals are more brief than Brown and Denham imply. Only Keen gives detailed information about Crackers. The common theme between his and Williams's writings is life on the frontier.

The Second Seminole War was an important event in Williams's life, too. She was born during the war in 1837 in a military barrack at Picolata where her family sought refuge from the bloodshed. Her parents' home was destroyed early in the conflict. She grimly recalls stumbling upon the remains of slain soldiers in the woods as a child and gathering fruit from old, destroyed plantations near her home in Picolata.

Besides these somewhat darker moments, Williams's memories of childhood are idyllic. Long excursions in the countryside and afternoon paddles down the St. Johns River with her naturalist father populate her reminiscences. She explains such forgotten crafts as gathering Spanish moss for mattresses. As a young lady, she spent a year in Charleston, South Carolina, in the home of relatives who intended to divorce her from her country ways. "All were kind," she recalled, "but things were so different,–my dress, my pronunciation and my very individuality were changed!" (p. 116).

Williams's adult life was considerably more trying than her younger years. Her husband, a novice planter from Lake City, died not long after their marriage. By then, the Civil War had thrown the country into chaos. While Keen only mentioned the war in passing, Williams was compelled to share her experience of the war. She explains the excitement that followed the Battle of Olustee as Lake City was filled with people fleeing the march of Union troops. Her images of life on the home front are invaluable. War shortages sparked such creative foods as Confederate Cake, a concoction of butter, eggs, and dried peaches. Her slaves' reaction to the war is also briefly recounted. Williams also describes her relationship with them in the postwar period, where her memoir closes.

The appendix of the book, or "Cast of Characters," gives detailed biographical information (when available) on the more than three hundred individuals–black, white, and Indian–who are mentioned in Keen and Williams's recollections. Brown and Denham's exhaustive background research shines here and in the notes that follow. Most of the Indian raids, murders, marriages, and other important events that Keen and Williams allude to have been verified. As a result, the basic facts behind long-forgotten events, in addition to the authors' observations and opinions of them, can be found in this dynamic work.

Nineteenth-century Florida's frontier people, often little more than cardboard figures in historical literature, come to life in the pages of *Cracker Times and Pioneer Lives.* Yet this book is not exclusively for academic historians. Anyone who enjoys short stories will find these tales entertaining. Genealogists interested in ancestors from Florida and neighboring states will find the book on the whole a very useful reference source. Keen's sto-

ries, and to a lesser extent Williams's, put more flesh on the early pioneers than census records and other government documents provide. Brown and Denham's work is a valuable addition to the scholarship on Southern society and the nineteenth-century frontier. Our understanding of the everyday people of the Florida of yesterday is expanded substantially.

Note

[1]. Frank Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).

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