

Historical Museum of Southern Florida

The Citrus Canker

By Jean C. Taylor

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From the time that Mrs. Tuttle sent a branch of live orange blossoms to Henry Flagler to persuade him to extend his railroad to Miami, orange groves played a big part in the life of Dade County. But in 1913, trouble with a capital "T" arrived to plague the orange growers. CITRUS CANKER. It wasn't a worm as one might think by the name, but a terrible germ disease that could be scattered by the wind or by birds or by no one knew just how. The only known cure was to burn the infected trees, which, of course, wasn't a cure at all, but did kill the germs and keep them from spreading. Citrus canker started as a spot on a leaf and then a rash spread like measles over the whole tree and sapped its life. At first the owners tried to treat the disease, but while they were experimenting to find an effective cure, it would spread to the surrounding grove.



The first year or so of the citrus canker eradication fight, the state refused any help in either funds or man power. Some of the leading grove owners in South Dade took up the task. Mr. Preston Lee of Silver Palm and Mr. William J. Krome of Redland organized groups and each contributed \$75.00 per month for supplies until the state finally realized the seriousness of the situation and came to the rescue with funds and forces to fight the pest.

Industry in Florida had just begun to make a come-back after the disastrous freezes of 1895 and 1896 when the citrus canker spread over the state and caused a financial panic. An embargo was put on the fruit so that none could be shipped and spread the disease. The State Plant Board took over the fight and hired inspectors and crews. A law was passed stating that every infected tree must be burned. Many of the farmers saw their livelihood disappearing and, unable to face the loss of income and years of labor, defied the crews to enter their groves with shotguns in hand. However, as the disease spread they soon came to realize that they must comply with the burning law.

Certain key men were sent by the state to the University of Florida at Gainesville, to take a course in how to fight the citrus canker. Charlie Cox was appointed an inspector for the South Dade area and sent to take the course. Charlie had a crew of about twenty men. They would go into a grove and walk around through the trees looking for signs of citrus canker. They were not permitted to touch the trees but would put a marker by any infected one and send a report to the fire group.



The crew wore white coveralls and usually a straw hat. After finishing an inspection the entire crew would remove their coveralls and wash them in bichloride of mercury and wipe their shoes and hat with the wet suit so as not to carry infection to the next grove. They hung their wet suits up to dry and put on a clean suit before proceeding. Before the state took over the expense it was the custom for women's clubs and church groups to hold dinners and entertainments to raise money to buy coveralls for the citrus canker fighters.

After the report on an infected grove was received by the fire committee, they would come in at once and destroy the trees. They operated a truck which had a tank of kerosene under pressure with a hose and long wand attached, which would shoot a flame into the air much like the flame throwers used later by the Germans in World War I.



When the disease was finally brought under control and the last burning had taken place, the inspection was continued sporadically for years both in commercial groves and in door yard plantings. Many grove owners were completely ruined and had to sell their land and go to Miami or elsewhere to find whatever work they could to support their families. Few had enough reserves to start over and replant after their trees were burned.

Those that did, turned to grapefruit, limes, avocados or mangos rather than risk a return of the dread citrus canker. There are many door yard plantings of oranges still in South Dade, but the day of the commercial orange grove died with the citrus canker and has never returned.

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