

REFLECTIONS OF THE EARLY DAYS OF FOUR MILE VILLAGE

Monday, October 10 through Sunday October 23, 1988.

Edwin Fretz Coffeen & wife Kay.

I attended a Sierra Club Annual meeting in the summer of 1982 where I was asked to address the group about the early days of Four Mile Village. I did so with considerable pleasure and it appeared that the group was very receptive of my reflections...so much so that I was requested to commit to writing these thoughts so the Sierra Club would have a more permanent record of those times. Needless to say that has not occurred. Six years later I finally got around to recordation of how Four Millage appeared to a 16 year old in the summer of 1948.

John Coffeen was my fathers older brother. All three Coffeen brothers, Donald, John & Henry were raised on a Wyoming cattle ranch near Sheridan during the first decade of the 20th century. John was educated and received a degree in mining engineering. This education was put to use in the the oilfields of Oklahoma and Texas in the 1920's & 30's. At some point unbeknownst to me, John Coffeen met and married Dorothy Bushnell of Massachusetts. They moved to New York City where John established himself during WW2 manufacturing communications equipment and Field telephones for the armed Forces. About this same time John and Dorothy became involved in an enterprise with Dorothy's brother Robert, who had recently been the Attorney General of Massachusetts. This endeavor fulfilled life long dream of Robert's to become a chicken farmer of note.

During the early 40's the Coffeen / Bushnell liaison purchased about 4,000 acres in and around Four Mile Village at the horrendous sum of \$50 an acre. This holding ultimately amounted to the area encompassed by Four Village, The Coffeen Nature preserve, and of all of Four Mile Point to include the easterly half of Horseshoe Bayou and those lands west of Mack bayou from the Gulf of Mexico to Choctawhatchee Bay. This land lay essentially natural until sometime in 1944 (?) when the U.S. Army Air Corps requested and was granted for \$1 per year lease of Four Mile south of Highway 98. This lease became known as Range 64 of the Eglin Army Air Force Base, Florida..

At this facility, the Army erected 21 buildings for habitation and at least 3 bunkers and launch ramps for guided missile experimentation. It is interesting for us to note that identical bunkers, structures, launch ramps exist today at McGrath state beach, Ventura County, California. These experiments are noted by the Army Air Corps in a letter of response to Miss Cindy Cosper of the Sierra Club dated June 22, 1983.

On this, the fortieth anniversary my of my first sight of Four Mile Village, the thing which stands out most in my mind as I turned into the entrance off highway 98 is the lush abundant growth everywhere I looked. This abundance is also near the store, the lake and Tops'1 Bluff. It amazes me what nature can accomplish in 40 years of care by nature lovers. John and Dorothy most assuredly have done on outstanding job and we all have benefitted..

By way of contrast, I would like to relay my impressions of Four Miles Village in 1948. Turning into the entrance then, what I saw a featureless expanse of scrub oak, palmetto, seedling pines, punctuated here and there by tall sand pines. The scrub oaks really nearly brush less than 18" high. The palmettos were few and scraggaly and the seedling pines were less than one foot high newly planted by John Coffeen.

Off to the left as soon as one enters, was a small trail at the end of which was the Armie's garbage dump. Also along this path was a large deposit of sand an asphalt mixture. (This asphalt was used by me and Uncle John to repair the roads.)

At that time there were three levels at Four Mile Village... The uppermost was the mess hall. The middle level was where two barracks were located and now is the Sierra Club camping area; and the lower level where the machine shop is. From the upper and the middle level Fuller lake could be clearly seen with only a few intervening tall pines. From near the door of the machine shop. The Army had in its infinite wisdom pushed down and destroyed everything that was not standing in a military fashion. They replaced it with structures in a neat and orderly rows. What was once a prime natural forest ended up a devastated wasteland.

In the early years, John and Dorothy hired three full-time employees. These workers were D. and Humphries Adkins and Herman Petersen.. Brothers D. and Humphries were woodsmen of the first order and they were utilized for difficult and tiresome tasks (laborers). D. was "man mountain" about as wide as he was tall, weighing nearly 300 pounds. He was not obese and could accomplish a great deal in a short time. Humphreis on the other hand was skinny, muscular and tall. These two looked nothing alike, but worked well together as a team..

Herman Petersen was the Four Mile finish carpenter and is responsible for the renovation of the Army buildings and bringing them to their present state.

As you know some of the houses near the beach were put together from pieces of the barracks buildings. Humphries and D. Moved them to the proper place and Herman Petersen finished them. The screened -in porches, interior walls, ceilings, bookcases, etc. are Herman's work. This process went on for several years. Herman was short stocky and gray-haired.. He was never seen without his denim cloth cap, so typical of a northern European laborers at the turn of the century.

The mainstay and principal payroll provider for Four Mile in the beginning came from two sources. One was the removal of railroad rails and other steel fixtures and their sale as scrap. It made little difference in early days on whose property the scrape was located. A great deal of it was removed from the property west of Four Mile which the Coffeens did not own at the time. This salvage operation went on for the better part of two years and did keep the workers employed..

The second source of income was a stumping operation. In the early years all of Four Mile Point was part of Four Mile Village as noted earlier. It is also noted that the area was timbered some time after the Civil War. Because the timber was plentiful, it was cut above waist height. These stumps were between 36" and 40" high and wide as a man could reach; over the years rotted they away so only the heartwood and the sap-filled, roots remained. For about ten years commencing in 1948, workers

from the turpentine mill in Pensacola arrived on Four Mile Point daily and blasted these stumps out of the ground. The stumps and root debris would be loaded on their huge trucks and hauled back to Pensacola to be made into turpentine. Turpentine was the lifeblood of Four Mile Village for many years. This income stopped when the property was sold to Sandestin to support the taxes on the remainder of Four Mile.

I especially want to thank George and Lucille Bishop who for 25 years have strived to carry on John and Dorothy Coffeen's dreams.

These are my recollections of the early years at Four Mile Village. During the intervening forty Years (remember this was written in 1988) a virtual wasteland was transformed into a Paradise. It is our fondest wish that under the stewardship of The Sierra Club and following the guidance provided by Dorothy Coffeen, that Four Mile Village continues to be a place cared for and that it remain a place of peace and quite, Keep it so and enjoy.

Ed and Kay as recorded by Kay, 1988