Pioneer Woman Politician: An Oral History Interview With Easter Lily Gates*

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Easter Lily Bilbo Gates was born in 1889 on April 21, Easter Sunday, in Des Moines, Iowa. During her childhood, her family moved several times and her widowed mother remarried.

Easter Lily's half-sister Mae Bivans Brindley, nee Wallace, was living in Fort Lauderdale when she died in 1981.

On January 20, 1910, Easter Lily married George Peter Gates. Their two sons, Bob and Ted, were born in Fort Lauderdale in 1919 and 1923, respectively.

ELG: Easter Lily Gates
CK: Cooper Kirk

ELG: I started to work in Ogden, Utah, in a canning factory, peeling tomatoes. My stepfather, [Harry Wal-}

CK: Is that where you began to develop that desire for hats?

ELG: Yes. I made hats for my dolls but I never made their clothes. Mother did that.

CK: You became known as the "hat woman," didn't you, in Florida?

ELG: People made it my hobby because I always wore a hat. I had long brown hair which would get streaked by the sun. I didn't like that. Of course, you pay money for that, now.

CK: For how long did you live in Ogden?

ELG: Until I married George Peter Gates on January 20, 1910. I didn't want to be way out in the sticks so he waited in the city until he took a job up in the mountains.

They had zinc and lead mines. They hauled that [material] down to the station and shipped it out.

CK: Was Gates still doing steam-fitting and plumbing?

ELG: No, he had a contract with the drilling machines that the miners used. He and his partner had three shifts a day working in the mines.

It was interesting. I got some beautiful specimens of lead and zinc ore.

*See "Behind the Scenes," inside front cover.
We could see the most wonderful sunsets, could look down at the great Salt Lake, the mountains all around. The sky would be purple when the sun was setting. The most beautiful sight...

CK: Your husband was working in the mines during the War. What brought you to Florida? When did you come?

ELG: It was March 1918 when we finally came to Florida. Gates decided he wanted a change. They were about done with the mining contract. We went to Nevada, to the Cinnabar Mines.

CK: Do you remember how long you were there?

ELG: For about a year before we returned to Ogden. After awhile they told us that Gates' father was very ill in Pennsylvania. We went back to see him. While there we got a letter from Dr. William Freiday, who was down here in Florida. He'd been the doctor out in Ogden, Utah, for years. I knew him ever since I was fifteen.

CK: He came down in 1911. So, you made plans to come to Florida.

ELG: Dr. Freiday thought we were still in Ogden. The letter was sent there, then forwarded to us. He had 40 acres, out where the international airport is now. He wanted us to come down and take his partner's half interest in it. We came down to look it over.

CK: What did he want you do?

ELG: He wanted us to come down, take the interest, live on it, and develop it.

CK: By building or farming?

ELG: At that time, we were in the [First] War and they were raising castor beans.

CK: Do you know what the castor bean was used for, or how many acres there were in Broward County?

ELG: They used it on the airships.

CK: The only thing that'd lubricate the engines was castor bean oil. We'd been shut off from our supply in India. The United States government put in a call for 100,000 acres. Florida was allocated 40,000. Broward County planted 1,500 acres.

ELG: We raised castor beans on the better part of the land. We had some land going down into the muck. We raised sugar cane on that and made syrup.

CK: What part would that be of the present airport?

ELG: Toward US1, where the port road goes out to the Seaboard Coast Line. We deeded 50 feet to them for the railroad. Years later they were building the port and wanted the railroad to go out. They put it along our west boundary.

CK: Did you actually grow the castor beans down here?

ELG: Yes, we grew them and took them to market. But, it didn't prove very profitable.

CK: How long did you have a house out there?

ELG: We had four rooms in our house out there. I had never been out anywhere like that. I was scared to death to be by myself.

CK: Was that already built when you came?

ELG: Yes, it and the barns and everything were built.

CK: Did you have a buggy or a car?

ELG: We had mules first, for the work, and we had horses. Later on, after Gates went to work, he got a car.

CK: What kind of work?

ELG: Plumbing, out in town.

CK: How long were you there, before moving to town?

ELG: We sold the farm in '23 or '24, just before the boom collapsed.

CK: You lived out there for about five years, then?

ELG: Yes. And I had to have something to do. So, I raised chickens - had good luck. I had the Rhode Island Reds for markets. They made plump fowls. I had a blue chicken, like the leghorn. Blue Andaluzians they were, with nice white eggs.

CK: Did you raise them mostly for eggs or for fryers?

ELG: I sold eggs, and I sold the settings of eggs.

CK: What do you mean?

ELG: You set them under an old hen or in an incubator. They put them under hens, and raised them that way. They made good eating. I had pretty good luck with the Blue Andaluzians, selling the baby
chickens. I'd hatch them out under the old hens; sold them for 25¢ each.

CK: Did people come out to buy them, or do you have to bring the eggs to town?

ELG: They'd come out. Gates was then working down at the Urmey Hotel in Miami. They were putting in steam heat. One day he said they took orders for 100 turkeys a day. They used that many.

CK: At that hotel?

ELG: Yes. I thought, "There's a market. I'll get some turkey eggs to put under these old hens." I got 15 eggs, put them under the old hens, and raised them out. Later on, I raised 30 out of 33 eggs.

CK: The hen didn't object to those eggs, then.

ELG: I went on raising them. I started breeding hens; I had three. And I got Great Toms. I still had my chickens. I raised the turkeys and put the turkey eggs under the hens. Then, I had the idea, "If I'm selling the chickens for 25¢ each, I'll sell the baby turkeys, hatched out, at $1 a piece."

I had a call from some people up in Eustis. He wanted 100 baby turkeys. I had 100 hatch out. I did it all by hens, turkey or chicken hens. If it was a chicken hen, she'd raise her turkeys up and just move around with them. But, with the turkey chicks, I didn't let them go out with the turkey hens at all, because they'd go out in the woods and get lost. I sold those baby turkeys and shipped them to Eustis, Florida, for $1 a piece.

I had advertised in the "Florida State Grower" and another paper. That's how I had orders from further away.

I sold turkeys to a hotel between here and Miami. They used a lot for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I made enough one year to buy an old Essex. But, when we went to go up on the mountains, on a visit in North Carolina, it wouldn't pull the hat off your head.

CK: An Essex car - two of us used to stand behind an Essex and hold that car back! It was the weakest car.

Would you tell us about the sugar cane that you raised?

ELG: We had five acres, on land that is now Hialeah, that we put out in sugar cane. We sold the cane for seed to a big Miami firm.

We also made syrup. We had one of the old mills that Maude the mule went 'round and 'round to grind that sugar cane. Gates would boil the syrup in a big black pot. It was mighty good.

Correspondence regarding salaries for county officials; May 25, 1933.

EASTER L. GATES
SECRETARY OF REGISTRATION
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.

May 25, 1933.

Hon. John R. Beacham,
Tallahassee, Fla.

Dear Sir:

I am writing in regard to the Bill pertaining to salaries of County Officials. I will appreciate it greatly if you can keep the maximum salary of my office at the maximum fifteen hundred. I have given every-day service with the exception of five days in 1929 and one week in October, 1932 on account of sickness. In order to keep down expense at election time I work through-out the year getting all in readiness. Also working early morning till late at night and Sunday's during the busy time.

In 1926 November election we had 1600 qualified voters and last November we had 5186. The salary for this office was the same as it is now so you can readily see the amount of work I am doing at the same price as the former official in 1926.

I have felt greatly indebted to the Broward County citizens for the handsome majority I received when I ran for the office in 1926 and also for not having opposition in the last election. My motto has been and is to render service to the fullest extent. In fact people have found no fault with the service I have been rendering. I will be handicapped in this service of course if my salary carries reduction as I have my children and Mother looking to me for support, however I will try to do the best I can. Talking this past year to folks they seemed to be satisfied, with the work and also the amount that I was being paid.

I appreciate your friendship and work you are doing in Tallahassee. Much favorable comment on yourself and Mr. Rogers and the work both of you are doing. I have laid these things before you trusting you to do the most you can for me.

Thanking you in advance,

Yours Sincerely,

Supervisor of Registration
of Broward County.
CK: You raised sugar cane, chickens, turkeys, and castor beans. But, that wasn't a very good business, the castor bean business.

ELG: No, didn't prove to be. We also had a citrus grove, orange and grapefruit.

CK: You had 40 acres, a pretty big plot of ground. And, your husband's working in Miami, gone back to plumbing. When did you move from that farm into Fort Lauderdale?

ELG: During the boom times, in '24, we sold our property and moved.

CK: The great Florida land boom was dealing in land. Would you describe your real estate deals at that time?

ELG: At that time the property was selling at a good price. We had a good down payment; there was a mortgage against it. We put $10,000 on the property where the federal courthouse is now, on the northwest corner of 3rd Avenue and Broward Boulevard. That was where our home was. It had two apartments.

CK: Was that a one or a two story building?

ELG: Two story. We lived in the lower apartment and rented the upper. Then, the 1926 storm came.

CK: Had your husband developed his sickness by the time you moved to the city?

ELG: Yes. He hadn't been feeling well. They didn't seem to find out what it, pernicious anemia, was because they hadn't got very far in their studies. It was just a question of time. He just got steadily weaker.

CK: Were you prepared for the hurricane?

ELG: No, we didn't know anything about it. We'd had blows, but never anything at all. It got to blowing so bad in the morning, I was alarmed.

The water was seeping into the yard. I thought, "This house is not very high. I'd better get them up." You couldn't see 50 feet for the smoother of water that was coming. "I'll take Bob." Seven, he was. I took him upstairs, put him on the back screened porch. Then I got Ted, he was three, and took him up the outside stairway.

I was going to take my husband up. He was helpless, couldn't walk. He said, "No, you just leave me here." I said, "No, if the Lord gives me strength, I'm going to take you up." And I did.

Next was to get the door opened; it was locked. I didn't have the key. I stepped to the back of the porch, ran and bumped into the door several times, trying to break it in. Couldn't. "I'll get in. I'll shinny up to the windows." They were all blown out by that time. I thought I could shinny up, get inside, and open the door. But, I couldn't do it. I went back up and tried again. "Lord, I've done all I can. Now You will have to do the rest."

Finally, I got inside and took a mattress off one bed. The plastering was off nearly the whole roof. The windows were all out on the south. I laid Gates on the the living room couch. I got another mattress and made a tent over him. He held Ted in his arms. Bob laid at the foot of the bed. The water was coming in from the window, all over him. I saw Bob's lips moving and went over to see what he was saying. He was singing.

I saw the other window glass bending from the force of the wind. "If that breaks, we'll all go down in the water." The area looked like it does around the ocean. The waves were up.

I saw that the door was coming down. "If that lock goes..." I tried a chair under the knob of the door; I bashed my knees against the knob. I held my hands up, pushing on the door, to keep it from coming back. I felt a Presence there with me. I had prayed about it and sang a song. "Oh, Lord, let me fly to the rock that is higher than I...let me fly, Lord, let me fly." I sang and felt the Presence there. I felt absolutely unafraid.

CK: Do you remember about when the winds went down?

ELG: Sometime in the afternoon.

CK: So, you were tied up for five or six hours, then?

ELG: Yes. There was a carpenters hall about 50 feet away which I hadn't been able to see. I could tell that the waters were subsiding.

CK: In other words, the water was so high that it was up at the top of the windowsill on the ground floor?

ELG: Yes.

CK: That must have been at least four feet high.