PLUME HUNT ON CYPRUS CREEK
Stuart MeIver

Sounds of gunfire across the waters of Florida Bay shattered the early morning silence at Flamingo. Guy Bradley, Audubon warden and deputy sheriff for Monroe County, rowed out toward Oyster Keys to investigate.

Guy’s job was to protect Florida’s plume birds. He had to prevent them from being shot, if possible. And if that failed, he had the difficult task of arresting the men who broke the bird protection law.

As he approached the schooner anchored near the keys, he saw two young men emerge from the mangroves and return to the larger boat. They were carrying birds they had shot.

Bradley tried to make an arrest but the father of the boys barred his way. In the shootout that followed, Bradley died. A Key West grand jury refused to indict the man who killed Bradley. Eyewitnesses said Bradley shot first. To them, it was simply a case of a frontier shootout — and Guy lost.

To the large world outside Monroe County, it was not that simple. Bradley was an Audubon warden, the first to be killed in line of duty, the first to die in the nationwide drive to stop the relentless slaughter of plume birds, the first man to perish on the firing line for the newly-emerging cause of conservation.

The martyrdom of Bradley became a rallying point for the Audubon movement all over the country. Within a decade of his death, state and national laws had been passed that effectively ended the plume trade. Hats decorated with plumes had become so popular that plume birds were facing extinction by the end of the nineteenth century. Bradley’s death proved a major force in reversing the tide.

When Bradley was killed on July 8, 1905, Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, for whom this county was named, sat in Tallahassee. Guy had never heard of Broward County, created 10 years after his death. But, as a boy he had lived briefly — and had almost died — in Fort Lauderdale; and as a teenager Guy Bradley, who was to become famous as an unrelenting foe to all plume hunters, went on a “skylarking” plume hunt on Cypress Creek near today’s Pompano Beach.

The Bradley family, who came to Florida from the Chicago area, celebrated the nation’s centennial by moving from Central Florida to South Florida. In April of 1876, E.R. Bradley, his wife Lydia, their sons Louis and Guy and their daughter Flora arrived at Hypoluxo Island in Lake Worth.

The Bradley boys promptly made friends with young Charlie Pierce, whose memoirs of pioneer days have given us our best account of life in Southeast Florida before the arrival of Henry M. Flagler.

Guy Bradley went plume hunting for the first time as a boy of eight. But even then he had his troubles. He was a sickly youth, a tag-along who followed after his brother Lou wherever he went. And to the dismay of Charlie and Lou, he always had a hard time keeping up.

In the spring of 1885, Guy Bradley took part in the best-documented plume hunt ever conducted, the famed “Cruise of the Bonton.” That year Charlie Pierce had the use of his uncle’s 28-foot sloop, the Bonton. The boat was chartered by Jean Chevelier, the legendary “Old Frenchman,” one of the most devastatingly effective of all the early plume hunters. Chevelier was living at the time on the Miami River. The Old Frenchman was planning a plume hunting and specimen-collecting expedition in the Keys and the Ten Thousand Islands. This would be Phase 2 in the cruise of the Bonton, a serious business venture. Phase 1 was another matter, a lark for three South Florida Huck Finns, a chance to shoot birds and gators, to camp out in the wilderness and to sit around the fire at night and talk endlessly.

Charlie was 20, Lou 16 and Guy 14 when they set out on March 11, 1885. Just before dawn on March 14, they arrived at the Hillsboro Inlet, poled the Bonton through and anchored in protected waters. On their second day inside the inlet, they located a side channel between high mangroves. They used this as an anchorage to conceal the Bonton while exploring creeks and waterways in their canoes. The following day they set out to hunt for plume birds. Locating the best channel was a bewildering task. The river branched in many directions and was filled with small islands covered with a heavy growth of bay and maple trees.

To make it even more confusing, a spring rain began to fall. The boys set up tents on their canoes in order to continue their search without getting themselves and their supplies thoroughly drenched. Late in the afternoon they selected a camp on a high bluff on the north side of the river. They named all their camps; this one was called Camp Look Out Bluff.

All night long rain pelted their tents, but morning dawned bright and clear. That day Charlie caught a large black bass and later killed a wood ibis, or as they called it, a gannet. They camped that night at a big hammock on the edge of a large sawgrass swamp, calling the site Camp Gannet.

The next morning they followed a small channel through sawgrass and lily pads when all signs of a channel vanished. They paddled back to the river. “On coming to a shallow part of the river we found a ten-foot alligator that did not intend, for some reason known only to him, to let us pass,” wrote Charlie. “Every time we started past him he would charge us with mouth wide open. At last, seeing there was no other way for us to get by, I killed him.”

That night, they camped on an island not far from Lookout Bluff. Guy and Lou each killed a purple grackle. Charlie killed two grackle, caught a bull head and speared a small soft-shelled turtle.
The next morning Guy caught two bream, but the boys considered the fishing "too slow." They resumed exploring. On this day, they moved westward on Cypress Creek*, following it for about a mile and a half. Near sundown they selected a camp in a small grove of cabbage palms. Since they had to wade through mud to reach the site, the camp was christened "Camp Stick in the Mud."

Late in the afternoon they reached Lettuce Lake,** named for its heavy infestation by an aquatic plant called water lettuce. Most of the next day was spent trying to determine how to move the canoes through thick plants and floating islands, one at least 50 feet wide.

Just before dark, the plume birds began to fly to their nesting place up Cypress Creek. Lou killed two herons, one white and one Louisiana; Guy shot a Louisiana heron and a grey curlew, and Charlie killed two white herons, one Louisiana Heron and one little blue heron.

Around noon the following day, they finally broke clear of the lettuce and reached open water. "Here the creek banks are lined with tall and stately cypress trees, some of them as much as seven feet thick at the base; growing very close together, and all covered with a heavy drapery of grey Spanish moss," wrote Charlie. "It was the wildest, loneliest and at the same time the most beautiful sight we had seen on any of our hunting trips."

"The creek here is about 75 feet wide and seven or eight feet deep, and on account of muddy bottom, black in color. The trees on each side are so tall and heavy...with moss the sun seldom shines on the water, and in consequence the creek is entirely free of water lilies, lettuce, moss or grass. But, alligators, we see them at every turn."

Around a bend in the creek, they found a small island, containing nesting plume birds, and immediately started shooting. "About 3 o'clock we had cleaned it up," wrote Charlie. The future Audubon warden killed two white herons plus a wood ibis, but he lagged behind his older companions. Between them they killed 13 herons and one egret. The boys continued on up the creek and at sunset birds began to fly overhead on their way back to their nests to the west. They shot at them as they flew by, killing a number of birds. Guy's contribution was one white heron and a peckit bird.

"What we call a peckit bird is a year-old blue heron, white in color, without plume, and not good for anything," complained Charlie.

That night they slept in their boats, since they were unable to find a dry campsite. They were awakened in the night by a big alligator who came up to their boat to eat the bodies of the birds they had thrown away after taking the plumes. Lou started to get up and shoot him but the sound of voices convinced the gator it was time to leave.

The next morning they found dry land. The north bank stood about three feet above the creek and was covered with grass and a grove of palmettos, and also served as a home for a ground rattler about three feet long. Charlie promptly killed it.

After dinner, they killed more birds, returning to camp just before darkness. From observing the westward flight of birds along the creek, they concluded there was a large rookery somewhere west of their camp. It was necessary at this point to switch to back-packing.

But Guy's lack of strength became a problem again.

"Guy is not at all well and I expect we will have to wait for him to rest on the way," wrote Charlie. His fears proved to be justified. Guy had to stop about every half mile or so.

"It was a fearful place," he wrote, "dense masses of ferns, briars and immense cypress trees. Some of the cypress trees were at least ten feet through at the base. We soon got enough of this place."

During the night the weather turned cold. Just after sunrise Charlie heard a noise off in the woods and discovered a slough full of plume birds feeding. He killed three white herons and one gannet. Next, the boys turned north into the swamp but at noon gave up any hope of finding the rookery. On the way back, they found a patch of huckleberries. Charlie complained of sore feet at the end of the long day.

The following day they set out to return to their canoes but Guy was still feeling so poorly he was unable to keep up with the others. Again and again, he had to stop to rest. When they were within a mile and a half of the camp, Lou and Charlie told Guy to go on ahead and rest whenever he wanted to, thus sparing them the embarrassment of stopping the caravan at such frequent intervals. After about a half an hour, they followed. Then they heard the sound of Guy's gun. Assuming he had fired as a signal, they hurried ahead but were unable to find him. They were worried. Ahead they saw the white tents of their camp, and still no sign of Guy.

"As we dashed into camp, there sat Mr. Guy with a grin on his face," wrote Charlie, "and a dead hen turkey lying at his feet. It was his first turkey, and he felt very proud of what he had done. So we named the camp Camp Hen."

The next day they explored a part of the creek near camp, using the remains of a burned Indian canoe they had found. Two days later they left Camp Hen and started west, still looking for the large rookery that had

---

* Cypress Creek winds through what is today the town of Pompano Beach; with today's seawalls and manmade canals, not to mention houses, the area bears little resemblance to the unspoiled wilderness the boys saw.

** Today, Lettuce Lake is known as Santa Barbara Lake, a more glamorous designation much better suited to the sale of property along the lake's shores. Lettuce Lake is hardly a prestigious address.
eluded them. On their way up the creek, they came upon a flock of egrets, killing and wounding one. They stopped to rest and spotted a flock of Carolina parakeets* flying to the west.

After an all-day rain on March 31, April 1 dawned clear and bright. They headed off into a cypress swamp looking for birds, but had to turn back when they found themselves up to their waists in water.

On their way back to camp, Charlie was walking ahead, followed Indian file by Lou and Guy. Lou called out, “Look, look.” Charlie, his mind on plume birds, looked up in the air but saw nothing.

“Where?” he asked.

“Aw, it’s gone now,” said Lou.

“What was it?”

“A deer right in front of us. Why didn’t you look ahead instead of up in the air?”

“Well,” said Charlie, “I was thinking and looking for plume birds and supposed that was in your mind, too.”

Charlie then learned what was in Lou’s mind—“April Fool.”

Later they celebrated April Fool’s Day by developing an early version of frisbee sailing. Charlie had cooked too many flapjacks and many had spoiled. So they amused themselves by sailing them off into the air. The camp for that day was named “Camp Flapjacks-all-around.”

After a morning of rain, the boys went fishing in the afternoon. Guy caught 15 bream and killed a gator. That night, a possum got into Charlie’s plume box and destroyed two blue plumes.

The next day the boys revisited a nesting place they had shot out earlier. They found it virtually deserted. Charlie managed to kill one plume bird and Guy killed an alligator. Fishing was better. Guy and Lou caught 45 bream between them and Charlie 17. That evening, they started to load their boats to leave for the Bonton the next morning. They spent most of the day struggling to navigate through the water lettuce. The next day, a Sunday, they stayed in camp washing clothes and picking huckleberries which they converted into a sauce for their flapjacks.

That night, Charlie ate all his huckleberry sauce, but Lou and Guy, thinking how delicious the sauce would taste over morning flapjacks, saved theirs for breakfast. This proved to be a mistake. During the night, a possum ate up the flapjacks and the sauce.

By 3 o’clock the following afternoon, the boys had made their way back to the Bonton.

“Our bunks felt good after such a long time in the swamps and woods,” wrote Charlie.

The next morning at high tide, they poled the Bonton out into the river. Before reaching the Hillsboro Inlet, they ran aground. Waiting for high water, they caught a good supply of fish, 13 mangrove snapper, three sea bass and one jewfish.

The next day the tide was still not high enough to free the Bonton.

“Went down to the inlet today,” Pierce’s account said. “The sea was very smooth. Went out on the bar where I speared a large barracuda, which was four or five feet long. He put up a pretty strong fight and bled quite freely from the spear wound. Soon as I had it in the boat, a bunch of sharks, smelling the blood, came rushing around. I slapped on the water with my spear to scare them away, as I thought one of them might take a notion to bite through the canvas bottom of my canoe. One of the sharks rushed up and grabbed the spear. When he felt the steel on his teeth, he dropped it quick and made for open seas as fast as he could go; in less than three minutes there was not a shark in sight.”

After the shark excitement, they proceeded down a long shallow bay just south of the inlet where they found “the finest oysters I had ever seen.” One oyster was so large that Charlie had Guy try his foot in the shell after he had eaten the oyster.

“It fit nicely,” Charlie wrote, “and Guy had a fair-sized foot for a boy his age.”

When they returned, the water was high. They poled the Bonton free and then proceeded on down to the inlet. That night they ate “A grand oyster stew, nothing else but oysters.”

The next morning found a smooth sea and a good northwest wind blowing. At 9 o’clock they hoisted the sails of the Bonton and sailed out the inlet “on to old ocean.” By 11, they sailed past the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge which must have brought sad memories to the Bradley boys.

On January 2, 1883, Guy’s father had succeeded Washington Jenkins as keeper of the Fort Lauderdale House of Refuge near the site of the present-day Bahia Mar, one of the largest and plushest marinas in the world. It was a less plush area then.

“How Wash Jenkins and his family managed to content themselves in this most isolated and out-of-the-way place was rather hard to imagine,” Charlie had noted some years before.

When the Bradleys arrived at the station, Jenkins was too sick to walk. He asked for passage to Miami on the boat that brought the Bradleys. He needed medical attention. The condition of Jenkins indicated trouble ahead for the Bradleys, but they had no way of knowing it at the time. Not long after the Bradleys arrived at Fort Lauderdale, Charlie Pierce and Lou took a trip back to the Lake Worth area.

* The Carolina parakeet became extinct about 1920 due to overhunting and loss of forest habitat. They were still common in South Florida until the 1890s.
"He was sick all the time on this trip and I did not understand just what kind of illness he had," wrote Charlie. "His face was puffed and colorless and his fingernails were blue. He wanted to sleep all the time, so I did the work on the boats alone."

Another time, Charlie, Guy and Lou were hunting west of Fort Lauderdale. For most of the trip, Guy was so sick he lay asleep in the bow of the canoe. After supper, the boys continued paddling their canoe back into the Everglades. They saw an Indian village a mile or so to the southeast and heard the dogs barking at the village. Charlie speaks of Lou's sleep that night as "troubled."

The Bradleys' persistent health problems should have warned them of a serious condition, coming as it did on the heels of Wash Jenkins' terrible sickness. But they kept trying to make a go of it.

Sometime later, probably in the Spring, Charlie returned to visit the Bradleys. "When I arrived at the Bradley boat landing, I was distressed to hear that Guy and his sister were very sick from the mysterious malady that afflicted Wash Jenkins when we moved him to the bay during the Fall. Flora, who was about 10 years old, died that afternoon only a few minutes after I got there."

"The workmen engaged in repairing the station made a coffin and she was buried the next day under a wide-spreading sea grape tree in the hammock northwest of the house. Guy swelled up so badly he could not walk. I carried him to the graveside."

In late Summer, Bradley resigned his post as keeper of the House of Refuge and returned to Lake Worth. He left behind his daughter Flora, many bitter memories — and a well that some observers believe was so contaminated that it brought widespread sickness and, finally, the death of a child.

For the Bradleys, the New River area of Broward County had proved to be a tragic place. But for Guy, his plume hunt along Cypress Creek had been a wonderful romp, an exciting part of the coming of age of a young man who had been plagued by ill health as a child. On an adventurous hunt with older boys, he had killed his share of plume birds which he would be able to convert into cash for 25 cents a plume.

Sometime after the Cypress Creek hunt, Guy became convinced that plume hunting was wrong. What, or who, changed his mind? There is no record of a dramatic conversion, a vision on the Road to Damascus. It was probably a combination of things. He had friends in Miami, the Kirk Munroes,* who were leaders in the Audubon movement in Florida. He could also observe for himself the cumulative destruction being caused by wiping out the rookeries. And finally, Guy was a law-abiding man. Plume hunting, legal when the boys paddled up Cypress Creek, was illegal when Guy became warden for Monroe County in 1902.

Broward County played a final ironic part in the saga of Guy Bradley. Captain Walter J. Smith, who allegedly killed Bradley in 1905, fled Flamingo after the shooting and gave himself up to authorities in Key West. After the grand jury failed to indict him, he left the area and settled in the tiny farming community of Pompano, not far from the Cypress Creek Guy knew as a boy.

Bibliographical Note: The principal source of information on Guy Bradley's Broward County plume hunt is the Pierce Manuscript, written by Charles William Pierce. A copy of this lengthy but extremely interesting manuscript can be found in the library of the Broward County Historical Commission. An excerpt from the manuscript, "The Cruise of the Bonton," was published in Tequesta, the Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, in 1962. In book form, a short version of the manuscript appeared in 1970, as Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida, edited by Dr. Donald Walter Curl and published by the University of Miami Press. Charles W. Pierce's only son was Charles Leon "Chuck" Pierce, well known in Broward County as president of what is today the Landmark First National Bank of Fort Lauderdale.

Stuart B. McIver, a veteran journalist and film writer, is a native of Sanford, North Carolina, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina. He has served on the staffs of the Greensboro, North Carolina, Daily News, the Charlotte, North Carolina, News, and the Baltimore Sun. A resident of South Florida since 1962, he now specializes in local history and is currently a contributing editor for the Miami magazine. Mr. McIver has written and produced more than eighty documentary films.