

The Dommerichs and the Blackmans Frontier Community Developers

It never occurred to me when I started this book that my own college would have anything to do with it. I just didn't understand that Rollins College was founded by the movers and shakers. They came from the cultural centers of the northeast and midwest, creating businesses, banks, agricultural enterprises, churches, and schools. While the founders, trustees, and first presidents of Rollins were men and women of substance, they were also living in a frontier.

Central Florida in 1885 consisted of about 10,000 citizens, mostly "outlanders" as the natives called them, settlers from some other state who often spent their summers elsewhere. The townspeople of Maitland and Winter Park numbered in the low hundreds. No school system was in place; so in order to found a college, they had to provide a prep school as well.

Recently while doing research on conservation in Florida, I discovered that Rollins had a hand in creating the first milestone in that history, the Florida Audubon Society (FAS). The early presidents and trustees of Rollins were pioneer environmentalists, that is to say, they were building the society at every level of culture and nature.



It all started in 1900 at Hiawatha, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Louis F. Dommerich of Maitland (left). Born in Germany, Dommerich made his fortune in New York, turning a dry goods company into one of the world's most successful commercial banking establishments by instituting a process of financing accounts. For the sake of his wife Clara's health, they started wintering in Florida in 1885, the same year the doors of the college first opened. Eventually they settled on the eastern shore of Lake Minnehaha, one of the chain of seven lakes connected to Lake Virginia, in an elegant Victorian home with grand gables and wrap-around porches (see figure below). Clara established the Maitland Public Library in 1896 and Louis joined the Rollins Board of Trustees in 1898.

Horrified at the slaughter in Florida of as many as 120,000 egrets a year by agents of the plumage industry, the Dommerichs called together a group of locals and some prominent leaders from other Florida communities to discuss what they could do. It was grass roots democracy at its best, though not without some conflict. The hunters were supplying the long primary feathers of our colorful water-stalkers for the hats and fans of ladies in Paris and London, New York and Boston, and all

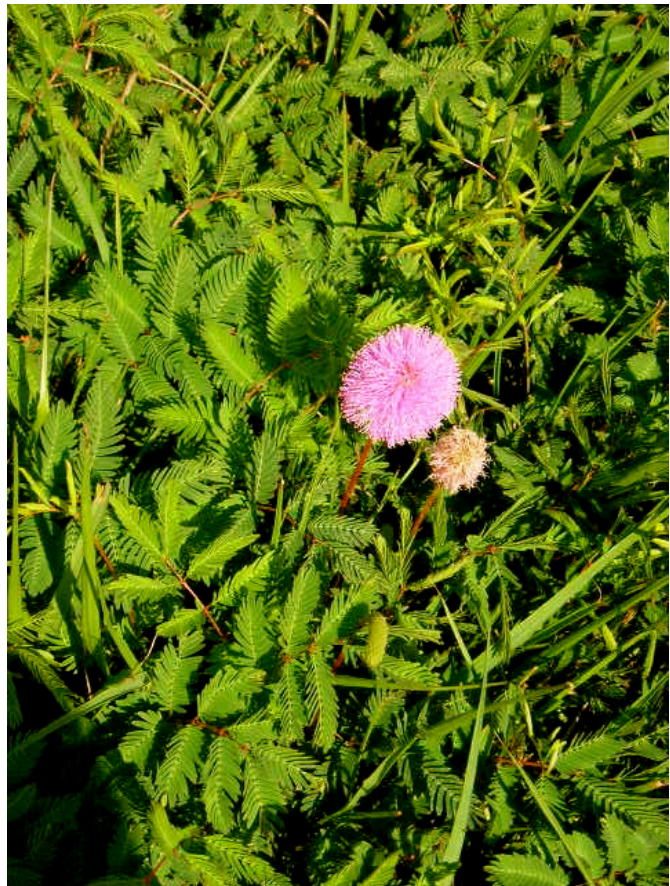
the lesser urban centers that would mimic their fashions. Something had to be done and so Clara Dommerich sent out some invitations.

The Rev. George Ward, third President of Rollins, was at the initial meeting when a group of fifteen drew up a constitution on the model of the New York Audubon Society with two simple goals: to stop the loss of the egret populations and to foster education about birds. They saw that a global market like this was best staunched at the local level where the extraction of the feathers was largely taking place; and they sought immediately to get a law in Florida to protect the glorious populations of wading birds from eventual extinction. They had a sense besides that such devastation of the natural world would eventually affect the health of the land and their own agricultural pursuits.

From the outset they understood that it would also take some clout on the national level and had the foresight to appoint Theodore Roosevelt, then governor of New York, as honorary vice president. The charter members also included other prominent national figures such as Frank Chapman, a leading ornithologist and curator of the American Museum of Natural History. Chapman had been coming to Florida to study birds for almost fifty years and he is the one who in 1900 initiated the first Christmas bird count. Other prominent members included Rose Cleveland, the sister of Grover Cleveland, Gov. W. D. Bloxham of Florida, and Kirk Munroe, a prominent writer of Florida stories of adventure.

The first president of FAS was Bishop H. B. Whipple of Minnesota who had settled in Maitland and opened the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd on Lake Avenue. He had been a leading force in Minnesota to negotiate a peace with the Sioux Indians in Montana and in 1890 had even had the honor of preaching in Westminster Abbey in London. He served as FAS president for two years and was succeeded by Louis Dommerich for the next decade. George Ward was vice-president.

When William Fremont Blackman came from Yale to be the fourth President of the college in 1902, he immediately got involved in this conservation effort and eventually served as president of Florida Audubon from 1912 to 1920, succeeding his friend. One of Blackman's first actions at the college must have been to establish a general education requirement for



environmental science because I find in the history that between 1902 and 1904, seventy-five students and faculty became members of the FAS. Neither the college nor the FAS could have been much larger than that. In 1909 he wrote a book to showcase the ecological value of the birds for citrus and cattle interests in the state.

The new grass roots effort had its first success in 1903 when Teddy Roosevelt, by then President, wrote the order to establish the first federal reserve for birds at Florida's Pelican Island. Gradually from this point on, the strategy of preserving the most precious habitats and rookeries began to set the right path for restoration of the populations of egrets and other waders: Passage Key (1905), Indian Key in Boca Ciega Bay (1906), and six more sanctuaries from Key West and the Tortugas to Pine Island (1908) were created by the progressive administration with urging from the Audubon movement.

The young Florida Audubon Society also succeeded in getting a law passed in Florida to stop the hunting for plumes, the Lacey Act of 1906. The livelihoods of many were at stake. However, since there was little or no enforcement of the law, FAS had to keep urging the authorities to use motorboats to catch the poachers. Some gun battles ensued when county officers tried to prosecute the law and two men actually died protecting birds. A further lesson in environmental politics came with a shock in 1915 when a new state legislature repealed the Lacey law at the request of county wardens.

All this time William Fremont Blackman was part of the contingent lobbying in Tallahassee while also leading the young college out of a financial crisis. He started a newsletter for the organization and was a leader with the Dommerichs in promoting the goal of education about birds: "Our efforts were directed to get the schools and their teachers interested, as we believe that by instructing the young people we best create interest and love for birds."

When Blackman retired as president of the college in 1915, he took up ranching on a 4000 acre plot between the confluence of the Wekiva and St. Johns River, just west of Sanford, calling it Wekiwa Ranch. It's all detailed in his diary of ranch life, the struggles of a Yale sociologist to learn how to sustain both animals and the land at once, especially when disease started to strike down his herd. Eventually he became president of the Florida Livestock Association. The brochure he printed up when it came time to sell his property in 1932 makes it sound like a paradise for raising every kind of food and flower.

Near the end of his days, Blackman published his history of Orange County (1927), and his wife, Lucy Worthington Blackman did a history of the FAS from which this little story is largely taken. For many years the Florida Audubon Society met at Rollins, not only when the Blackman's were its leaders, but later when Professor A. J. Hanna, building a career in Florida history and archaeology, became president of FAS (1943-47) and held meetings on campus in the Annie Russell Theatre. In 1943 he wrote a book on the St. Johns in the American Rivers series, co-authored with novelist Branch Cabell. Hanna's was a career made out of the subtle mixture of river (nature) and culture.

Who are the developers today who fit the mold of the Dommerichs and the Blackmans? They had a comprehensive view of community building that would welcome the planning

system we have today and link growth more fully to education, transportation, agriculture, water resources, and conservation.



“Hiawatha”: The Dommerich House in 1896 on the eastern shore of Lake Minnehaha in Maitland had 30 rooms and was surrounded by 138 acres of landscaped gardens with sixty acres of orange groves. Photo, looking north, by H. J. Webber.

Photos courtesy of the Rollins College Archives

The original Audubon Society founded by George Bird Grinnell in 1886 folded in three years' time, but was revived a decade later as a state organization when first Massachusetts and later a dozen other states, seeing the devastation of the plumage industry on bird populations of the southern rivers and swamps, tried to get their members to discourage the buying and wearing of feathered garments and decorations. The National Audubon Society began to emerge in 1902, out of the confederation of the state organizations.

According to Mrs. Isaac Vanderpool, the Dommerich's were both ardent lovers of nature and appalled in their travels around Florida at “the tourist gun doing its deadly work unmolested from the decks of every steamer. . . in the St. Johns River. The seriousness of this matter was felt by them, and they deemed it their duty in some way to arrest the wanton destruction that sooner or later must result in serious trouble to those whose living depended on crops of fruit, grain, and vegetables.” See A. J. Hanna's three-page preparations for a life of Louis F. Dommerich.