

KEY WEST HISTORIC TRACTS, No. 1.

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Key West, Fla.

Before the Fire of March 30th, 1886.

— BY —

The New York Sun Man.

A SKETCH.

A CRITICISM.

A BURLESQUE.

KEY WEST NEWS COMPANY,
KEY WEST, FLA.

1907.

A PARADISE FOR LAZY MEN.

LIFE IN KEY WEST—LIVING ON SEVENTY-FIVE CENTS A WEEK—THE ONE SPOT IN ALL THE UNITED STATES WHERE MEN ARE BORN TIRED.

In many respects this is the most remarkable spot in Uncle Sam's domain. There must be a brilliant future in store for Key West, as it has no past and very little present. While the rest of the Union has been up and doing, this coral key has slumbered in the Gulf almost unknown to the world, and caring nothing about the world's manners or customs. It is alike peculiar in climate, situation, structure and population. It is the furthest south of the most southerly State, and is indeed the very end of the United States. When the sun has traced the highest point of his spiral course on the twenty-first of June, he is almost directly over Key West, as it lies in latitude $24^{\circ} 32''$, and the border of the tropics is only sixty miles south. On the map you will notice a chain of little dots trailing south-southwest from the Florida peninsula. They are keys, and at the end is Key West. Speaking strictly, there are several keys still farther west and south, but they are merely a speck in the water sufficient to hold a lighthouse, with the exception of the Tortugas, on which Mr. Jefferson Davis, when Secretary of War, built a fourteen-million dollar fort, now in charge of a garrison of one ordnance sergeant, and somewhat in need of repair.

The climate is essentially tropical. This is the only city in the United States where neither snow nor frost has ever been seen. The lowest temperature ever recorded was 41° about thirty years ago, and again in winter of 1885-6; the lowest in 1884 was 51° . The average temperature for January, 1885, was 72° ; for the months of July and August it is about 84° . The daily range of temperature is very small, rarely more than 10° , and sometimes as low as 2° ; and the highest temperature in summer seldom exceeds 94° . During the northerns of the winter months, a temperature of 60° is low enough to shiver the entire community, and overcoats with fur collars are in great demand. During a cold snap, when the Mt. Washington signal station reported 50° below zero, the Key West station was 72° above—a small matter of 122° dif-

ference. *Lying in the track of the northeast trades, with the Gulf Stream a dozen miles to the south, Key West has, without exception, the finest climate in the United States.* There is always a breeze and rarely a gale, and you may wear a straw hat with propriety nearly every day in the year. It is solely due to the monumental sluggishness of the population that Key West is almost unknown to the tourist and health-seeker.

Key West is reached by steamers from New York, from New Orleans, and by a mail steamer from Tampa Bay. The key has as much shape as a camel, but in a general way lies east and west, and contains about six square miles. It is as flat as a pancake, the highest point being sixteen feet above mean sea level. To the casual visitor it looks as though the sea, particularly in a storm, would submerge this insignificant rise; but it is a matter of record that it never has. The city proper covers the western end of the key. It is densely settled, and about as un-American as possible, bearing a strong resemblance to a West Indian town. The houses are of wood, plainly built, and, with a few exceptions, painted white. There are, I think, only three brick buildings, certainly not more than six. Piazzas abound, and occasionally some lattice work is seen, but there is no attempt at decoration or display. Many of the business houses have no signs, and there is a general air of don't-care-whether-I-sell-or-not about the shops. The houses are of all sizes, jumbled up in the oddest way, and anywhere but on the line of the street. The interior of each block is filled up with one-story shanties, access to which is had by going up alleys, and through fences, or going through somebody else's yard. The population being 15,000, land is precious. Lots are divided and subdivided, and houses built in yards and gardens are wedged in here, there and everywhere, facing sixteen ways for Sunday. Where there is no room for a house they build a stable or a pig pen, and sprinkle chickens around in the corners. The richest people do not disdain to thus add from three to six dollars a month to their income, although it destroys their privacy and disfigures their grounds.

The streets are of good width, tolerably straight and passably clean. The roadway is coral rock. There is no soil. What passes for soil is merely triturated coral, wonderfully rich in phosphates, and making an excellent fertilizer, but, by itself, deficient in fat. To garden, you must use a pick instead of a hoe. No vegetables are raised on the key, and the vegetation is confined mainly to the cocoanut trees. Here and there you will find a pine or an oleander, a star of India or a royal poinciana;

but in the main there is a lack of foliage. The nature of the population is thus shown. The key has been settled for sixty years; every tropical and semi-tropical tree, shrub or flower known to man has but to be planted to grow, and the city is bare, hot and verdureless.

The white houses, without a vine or climbing flower, the dazzling streets, without a tree and with few sidewalks—dusty and glaring wherever you look—it is enough to make you wish for a hurricane to stir the city's blood. Yet, to the student of sociology, the explanation is plain. The population is to blame, and the climate makes the population.

This key is settled by Cubans, negroes, Conchs and Americans. Placing the population at 15,000, the proportions are about five, four five and one. These proportions live in an agreeable state of contempt and discord. The Cubans hate the Conchs (natives of the Bahamas are so called by everybody except themselves), the Conchs cordially detest "them Cubans," and both unite in despising "niggers." The little band of Americans and English are generally employed in scheming to get away from the island. There is Conch Town, Nigger Town and Cuban Village, with very ill-defined limits, however. Each has its own occupations, amusements and turmoil.

The Cubans are usually employed in the cigar factories, which number over 100, and which turn out over a million cigars a week. The men are undersized, weak and effeminate, and given to gambling, cock-fighting and filibustering. The women are passably good-looking, given to obesity, high heels, lace shawls and face powder. Men and women smoke incessantly and chatter continuously. They crowd together, and subsist on oil, coffee, pork and bananas.

The Conchs are big, hardy, and phenomenally ignorant. They have the cockney sticking out all over them, and drop the "h" where needed, and clap it on where it is not needed, talk of "veeds," "vimmen," "winger," and live on fish and hominy. The Conchs are spongers, fishers and wreckers.

The colored folks drive the drays and hacks, act as porters and stevedores, and do the bulk of the heavy sitting around. Everybody takes a turn at the latter work, however, and the whole community offers to the historian the most striking example of people born tired. It is an edifying spectacle to Northern eyes to see a native of Key West going on an errand or doing a piece of work. Usually he moves like a snail. If you are not particular, you can live for seventy-five cents a week. A stick of sugar cane costs only three cents. Bananas and oranges can be hooked

from the auctioneers, hominy is cheap, and a string of fish can be caught from any wharf. For a shelter there is little need, save to keep off the rain, and it needs not a house to do that. What a country for a tramp! What a climate for the poor!

The town is amply supplied with saloons, notwithstanding a monthly license of \$50, which leaves the taxes on real estate about one mill on the dollar, and on a one-third valuation at that. It does not prevent the tax-payers from gambling, however. Shops of every description abound, mostly small, with \$7 to \$10 stocks, and which draw their supplies chiefly from the auctions—a great feature of Key West.

The auctions are held daily at 10 a. m. on the open street. Everything is sold—horses, mules, wagons, meats and vegetables, fruits and furniture, dry goods and real estate. Wonderful bargains can be had at times—oranges 50 cents a hundred, pineapples a cent apiece, bananas ten cents a bunch, and so on. The merchants of New York, in the fall and winter, unload their summer stock of dry goods and clothing upon this market, and prices are very reasonable.

In keeping with the prevailing lack of enterprise, the accommodations for visitors are meager. Two private boarding-houses and one hotel is the sum total. Pick up any travelers' guide, tourists' handbook, or railroad advertisement, and search for Key West, and you will search in vain. With a larger population than any other city in Florida, and greater capabilities for being made a pleasure resort and sanitarium than any city in the Union, it remains an unknown land. There are signs, however, of an awakening. The city was lately lighted with gas and a street railroad laid. There is even talk of a new and large hotel, to be built this summer, and of increased mail facilities. At present there is a semi-weekly mail service by steamer, connecting at Tampa with the Florida Southern Railway. The service is of the most exasperating description. Supposed to arrive on Wednesday and Saturday of each week at 5 p. m., the mails are frequently ten hours, and sometimes an entire day behind. Even then the bag of newspapers or the registered pouch may have been forgotten. Such a state of affairs in any other city of 15,000 inhabitants—even in a Dakota village of 1,500—would result in a mutiny or a petition to Congress, but here it is taken with lazy indifference. With the advent of Northern capital and enterprise, this key might be converted into a famous resort. The people here will never bestir themselves. They must be boosted into fame. The place needs several first-class hotels, a road around the island, sidewalks and plenty of trees.

I have already spoken of the fishing. It cannot be surpassed. The waters swarm with grunts, snappers, pompano, kingfish, sturgeon and sharks. The boating is superb, but there are no boats. Bathing can be indulged in every month of the year, although there is no surf.

Despite the piggish manner of living and the entire absence of any system of sewerage, the general health is excellent. There is considerable talk of yellow fever every summer, but as a matter of fact there has not been a death from that disease since 1882. The restaurants are worth a description. The first essential is a site in a by street, if possible. If that is unobtainable, locate on the corner of an alley. Let the alley and street be full of ruts and hollows, so that garbage and filth may accumulate in the vicinity. The restaurant proper must have a low ceiling, with greasy, smoky walls, and be lighted by two, or at the most three, malodorous kerosene lamps, backed by reflectors that don't reflect. Sprinkle around the floor any number of small tables, no two of the same size, covered with oil-cloth. Place at each table four or five pine chairs, and garnish the oil-cloth with a can of condensed milk and a bowl containing sugar and flies, having a box of limes, a basket of oranges, and a bunch of bananas and some bad cigars handy. Now introduce three dozen Cubans in wrinkled linen trousers, greasy undershirts and straw hats. Have at least a dozen wear slippers without stockings. The proprietor may be of any age or build so that he wears no coat or stockings and be greasier than his customers. Spread over all a thick layer of flies and mosquitoes and a heterogeneous odor of decaying fruit, olive oil, coal oil, tobacco, garlic and coffee. Then let everybody talk at once, and wave their hands in the air and in each other's faces, and let the proprietor have a personal altercation with everybody every five minutes, while an outside mob of boys chew sugar cane and swear in Spanish, and a cloud of tobacco smoke overspreads all like a dirty aureole.

While there was a possibility of the adoption of the Spanish treaty, quite a panic prevailed here among the cigarmakers and their employers. It was understood that the cigar industry would be destroyed, and a general exodus of the Cuban population was in prospect. The prosperity such as it is, of the city hinges largely upon the Cubans. They are not eligible tenants. They leave houses in poor repair when they move out, and are somewhat addicted to the pastime known as "jumping the rent," but they are several hundred per cent. better than no tenants at all. Their diet is limited, but they do buy something; and, in short, it was and is believed that when the Cubans go Key West will be ruined. The

Cubans are poor citizens. Their hopes and aspirations are in the ever faithful isle, and they care very little for the land of their adoption. They are a political power here, however, and are allowed to have their own way in everything. Upon one occasion they illustrated this by electing as Mayor of Key West a compatriot who had fled from Cuba with a price on his head, and who had been only three months on American soil. In addition to his other claims upon the suffrages of his countrymen, he could not speak more than six words of English.

The daily reports of the fitting out of filibustering expeditions from this port are fictitious. There is neither money nor nerve on the island, and the reports excite only derision here. Every once in so often a tourist writes from here a dozen glowing lines descriptive of the sloe-eyed senoritas with rosy checks and willowy forms, but it is understood here that these angels are only exhibited to strangers. No resident has ever been permitted to gaze on their charms, and the longer you live here the more you don't see them.

In the way of amusements the city is probably the dullest on the continent. An average of two theatrical troops per year, one Masonic hop, one Oddfellows' ditto, and a Cuban dance every month, all slimly patronized, are the attractions. In religion and all things religious a most absorbing interest is taken by high and low, and for the majority it is at once occupation and recreation. The colored folks have their revivals, and they are most astonishing exhibitions. The shouting, singing, tearing of hair and rolling on the floor is a spectacle for Northern eyes. The process of getting religion sometimes consumes three days, during which the would-be convert literally sprawls on the floor, fasting and praying. When the religion comes, it is proclaimed by shouts of "Glory! glory!" and by phenomenal leaps in the air, while the congregation sing and shout hymns. Each hymn has from fifty to one hundred verses. The usual society topics relate to who was converted, who left the Baptist to join the Methodist, or vice versa. There is great shuffling round among the churches, and much discord and gossip. The ministers preach to enormous and enthusiastic congregations at stipends varying from \$40 to \$60 a month and house rent.

Wrecks and weather are the remaining topics. No newspapers or books are read. Nothing is known of what is going on in the outer world, and nobody cares. Except gambling, crime is almost unknown. The people are quiet, peaceful, lazy, religious, ignorant and blissfully content.

KEY WEST, FLORIDA.

City of Key West, population 20,000, a port at sea, southernmost and only no frost city in U. S., situated on Island of Key West, county seat of Monroe County, Florida; latitude 24° 34' north; longitude 81° 49' west. Mean temperature 1871 to 1895, 77°. For past twenty years lowest monthly mean 77° in January, highest 84° in August. Since 1886 highest record 92°, lowest 44°. Average annual rainfall 1871 to 1895, 39 inches. Average annual number of cloudy days 64; minimum 1883 and 1885, 32 days; maximum in 1890, 91 days. Owing to coral bottom and bright atmosphere the sea is wonderfully clear to the eye, and owing to wealth of salts remarkably buoyant, thus for boating, swimming, fishing excellent. Yearly average number of calm days past five years only 10. In 1894 only 27 hours and in 1895 but 54 hours of calm recorded. The trade winds furnish an almost constant breeze that tempers the hottest of summer days. Key West possesses the most equitable climate in the United States, lowest record being 40° 8', highest 95°.

Lying in the straits midway between Florida and Cuba, Key West at the west end of a continuous line of keys is the natural terminus of the Florida East Coast System, and is distant but 90 miles from Havana, with which mail connection is had by the Plant Steamship Line. Here is a U. S. Coaling and Naval Station, U. S. Garrison, 3d Art'y, Fort Taylor and Batteries, U. S. M. Hospital, Officers' Quarters, U. S. Weather Station, handsome U. S. Public Building, Public Library, Masonic and Odd Fellows Halls, fine Concert Park and School, St. Paul's P. E. Church with the finest chimes in state, and Protestant Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches. Key West Park of 24 acres is being laid out. Industries are cigar making, sponging, wrecking, supplies and fruit raising on Keys. There is the greatest variety of fishes in U. S. waters, from tarpon and jew fish to sardine, about Key West, where may be found 170 varieties, all of the West India fauna, 40 of which are unknown in other U. S. waters. One fifth less of varieties are found at Cedar Keys, where is the Carolina fauna. The flora embraces among fruit the cocoa and date palm, almond, sapodilla, mango, sugar apple, lime, lemon, orange, Spanish lime, sour sop, alligator pear, pineapple, etc., and every variety of flowering tree and shrub, including Royal Poinciana, Jasmine, Poinsettia, Bergamot, etc. Hard coral streets, breezes from old ocean, sail crafts sighted from every point of view, brilliant sun, clear sky, lovely moonlights, splendid sunsets, grand cloud forms, superb stretches of water scenes, transparent sea, all unite to make the island life as beautiful as it is unique.

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