

## My Childhood Growing Up on the Indian River

Janet Walker Anderson

I moved to the Indian River at the ripe age of 4 years old. My dad, Emmett Walker, was the bridge tender of the Winter Beach Bridge for 5 years. We (my dad, my mom, Lizzie, my sister, Lena, and my brother, Huey, and myself, with my baby brother, Dewey, being born while we lived there) lived at the east end of the bridge. My mom was now living only half a mile from where she was born, as her parents were pioneers from North Florida. The house itself was built high so when hurricanes came, the river could rise and run underneath.

The river became our playground. My dad was given permission to clear a small area of shoreline near the bridge to build a dock allowing people to tie up their boats and fish. It also became a popular place to swim as it adjoined the channel. All the teenagers from Winter Beach would walk over and swim with us on the weekends. Some would walk on over to the beach.

My dad also cleared a large area across the road and made a park with picnic table, a swing, and a seesaw, which was a fun place to play.

As our favorite pastime, my sister Lena and I would climb on the mangroves along the river and see how far we could go without falling into the water. We became really good at this and could stay dry for hours.

Dad made swings from a tire and a croaker sack full of sand and hung them in the oak trees in our yard. We also learned to rowboats at a very young age and we were allowed to take them out on the river after we learned to swim well, which didn't take long.

The fishing was exceptional in the area and people would come to fish off of the bridge or go out in one of our boats. We would catch and sell fish to the fish houses in Sebastian for extra money. We would even salt them down for people to take back North.

We had hogs on one of the islands and when the people would get close to the island in their boats, the hogs would swim out to greet them, and then swim back to the island. There were lots of oak trees on the island so the wild hogs had plenty of acorns to eat. When Dad was ready to eat or sell one, he would bring it over to the pen in our yard to fatten it up.

The bridge had a draw section that had to be opened and closed when the boats would come through and we were able to help my dad sometimes. We all enjoyed helping my dad with this task.

There was a pier in the middle of the channel for the draw to set in when it was open and one on each side of the channel. Sometime barges would come through and hit the middle pier and damage it so badly it couldn't be closed for several days until it was repaired. When this happened, the traffic had to be rerouted to the mainland by way of Wabasso or Vero bridges, depending on where they were going.

We always had plenty of fish to eat, so my dad would invite anyone who happened to be around to eat with us. My mom never knew how many to cook for so she always made a big pot of grits to go along with the fish.

We had very few neighbors, but always had fun with the Metz family (Mrs. Metz, Fannie, Mary, Bill, Bob, Ken, and Jack) that lived closest to us, and the Jones family (Tim, Hoyt, and Milton) who lived just a little further up Jungle Trail.

During World War II, it was necessary for the Coast Guard to track the boats going up and down the river as well as vehicles coming and going across the bridge. They all had to be stopped and checked. There was a Coast Guard station in Wabasso that kept everyone busy, as it was a twenty-four hour schedule. We, of course, enjoyed being where things were happening.

Every once in a while, we would hear that there were German submarines near the ocean shore, but when we would ask our dad about it, he would tell us it was not true so we wouldn't worry too much. I didn't find out that it was true until I was grown.

We always had plenty to eat... fish, shrimp, pork, and oysters; even raised a cow to eat. Our family and friends would enjoy going to one of the small islands and have a picnic. Dad would get oysters and Mom would have a pot ready to make stew and fry some... YUMMY!!!

My sister and I would catch fiddler crabs out of the little holes on the shore and sell them by the dozen to fishermen for bait. They used the small crabs to catch sheep head, snapper, and other bottom fish.

And of course, I will never forget about mosquitos and sandflies! Mosquitoes would cover your legs until they were solid black if you didn't carry a pine switch to brush them off. We would have to build "smudge pots" to smoke the sandflies away or paint the screens with kerosene to keep them out at night so we could sleep.

Students living on the island attended school in Vero. The bus would pick up the Woods children from the Vero Bridge, my siblings and myself at Winter Beach Bridge, and then pick up the others that lived on the island toward Wabasso. What a long way to get to school, but we made it!!!

Even at such a young age, I will always remember living on the Indian River as a special time in my life. When I was nine years old, my dad became very sick and could no longer do his job so we had to move back to the mainland in Winter Beach. My dad passed away the following year but God took care of our family, just as He continues to do so now.