

Renney Family of Gulfport Pinellas Pioneers

by Charlie J. Grandmason

This is a history about a family that helped in the development of Florida beginning in the 1850's. Their influence and lives extended from Key West and the Bahamas, to Tarpon Springs

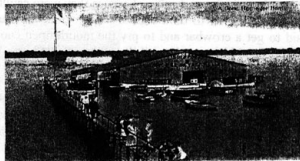
While I was in the process of producing the index for the Pinellas Pioneers microfilm, I noticed that some members of the Renney family had interesting and unusual experiences! Some items of the Renney family story are included in this article as written for the Pinellas Genealogy Quarterly. As a result of writing this article about a Pinellas Pioneer family, I have also produced a booklet of some twenty pages about the Renney family that includes their genealogy, vital statistics, and a number of old photographs. This booklet will be available to review at the Largo Library and at the Gulfport Historical Museum by the end of this year (2000).

The family patriarch, **John William Renney**, was born at New York in 1818, and when old enough, he went to Key West. He married Lenore Lowe, daughter of Gideon and Nancy Sanders in 1850, and they had 1 son and 2 daughters. One of the daughters went back north and married on Long Island in New York. The other daughter married and lived at various places in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas. Their son, William Andrew Renney, was married to Elvira Dixon in Ozona Florida in 1875. This Renney family lived at various times in Ozona, and Key West, finally settling in Gulfport Florida. Their source of livelihood in those days was somewhat colorful. They were sponge divers and also wreckers. A wrecker is a term that was used for salvage pirates of that period.

When **William A Renney** brought his family to Gulfport, he became a fisherman. This story will tell how some of his children and descendants were very active in that industry. William and Elvira had nine children and also raised an adopted son of a close relative who had died.

One son, **Lawrence David Renney**, was born in 1883 in Ozona Florida. He married Christine Rebecca Slaughter in 1904. Christine is descended from a very important pioneer family who was among the first settlers of Gulfport. Lawrence was employed as the captain of a Steamboat that carried people and supplies between Tampa and the bay ports of what is now Pinellas County. Lawrence and Christine operated the first yacht club in southern Pinellas County. An early photocopy of the "Boca Ceiga" (note the spelling of Ceiga and not Ciega) Yacht Club" is included here.

Elmer Wintersgill built it in 1910, but it was destroyed in a storm in 1918. Lawrence was also Gulfport Town Marshall about that time. In 1925, Lawrence was nominated as mayor of Gulfport for two years. During this period, Lawrence appointed his brother, Samuel P Renney, as Police Chief, and one of his sons, Russell, became Fire Chief.



Samuel P Renney, Chief of Police for Gulfport, was a very interesting and colorful person - until an "accident" at sea took his life. Walter P Fuller, St Petersburg developer, journalist, and historian once sent a letter to Samuel's son William. That letter describes some of his experiences about Samuel P Renney. Samuel P Renney disappeared at sea while captain of the fishing boat, *Miss Detroit*. The ship and 5 passengers were lost in the Gulf of Mexico and never found. Walter Fuller's letter states that he suspected that a German U-boat was involved, but that was never proven.

Walter also wrote that he first met Samuel Renney in 1916 when Sam was a streetcar conductor on the local line. Walter's father, H Walter Fuller owned the streetcar line and suspected everyone of stealing some of the fare receipts. H W Fuller would hire operatives to board the streetcars and spot for any pilfering! Samuel Renney went to see the elder Fuller to tell him, "Mr. Fuller, all the boys have spotted your spotters, and you are wasting your money. The next time you have a bunch come in, tell them not to wear derby hats or coats, because we immediately know what they are here for."

Walter Fuller's letter also describes a couple of alligator hunts that he went on with Samuel Renney. An alligator farm had recently opened on South Fourth Street. The owner wanted to buy some large alligators to show to the tourists and a lot of little ones to sell to them. Sam and Walter at first went hunting at Maximo Point on Tzar Bennett's property. They chose a day when they thought that the old man would be away on his biweekly shopping trip! They crawled through a hole in the fence near to a pond with a big alligator. They had just hooked a big one with a gaff on a long pole, when T Bennett came through the palmettos with a double barrel shotgun, and he shouted, "Get off my land". Sam calmly walked up to the old man, ducked and grabbed the gun away. He unloaded it, and threw it at the old man's feet. The hunter pair then crawled back out through the fence, and left sans big alligator.

Their next trip was to a more familiar area on Joe's creek, near to Park Street and Tyrone Boulevard. There was an alligator nest there, and the eggs were just beginning to hatch. Sam and Walter had found the right place and were kept very busy filling two sacks with baby gators. They didn't see the mama alligator when she sprang up from the creek! In a moment she grabbed Sam's right arm and started to roll. When alligators catch an animal, they hold it in their jaws, and twist and roll their body until the animal's bones are broken and it is disabled. Sam realized this, so he wrapped his free arm and legs around the alligator and rolled with her on the ground. When the pair stopped rolling because they were caught between a tree and a palmetto clump,

Sam told Walter to tie the gator's forelegs behind her back to disable her movements. He then said to get a crowbar and to pry the mouth open enough so that he could get his arm out. Sam did not tend his wounds until the gator was tied up. Walter Fuller writes, "Some man! The most courageous one I ever saw!"

Walter P Fuller was the author of the history book, "St Petersburg and It's People". Many stories about the early days of St Petersburg are in that book. The book is available at most Libraries in Pinellas County. None of the above information is available in that book.



his Gulfport Fish Mkt.

The photo upper left shows Sam P Renney in front of his market with his right arm bandaged up after the alligator episode described in Walter Fuller's letter sent to William S Renney. When Sam P Renney was Police Chief in Gulfport, he used his own motorcycle to carry out his police job around town. His picture is on the upper right.

Russell D Renney, a son of Lawrence D and Christine Slaughter, was the first volunteer fireman to be paid a regular salary in Gulfport. He was appointed Fire Chief in 1927. There was 1 chief and 9 fireman volunteers in 1928.

FireChief:	Russell D Renney	Asst Chief:	C W Cobb
Driver:	Whitney Herbert		
Firemen:	Elmer Morrison		Mack Brooks
	Vernon L Turpin		Sidney Webb
	Rufus Renney		Norman Huckins
	Cobb Nash		

As the depression years began to affect Florida, the town of Gulfport went into a financial crisis. The town council of Gulfport made drastic slashes in the salaries of all town employees. W W Swift Town Clerk and his secretary Olivia Ann Swift resigned. Police Chief Chumney had his salary cut from \$30 per week to \$12.50 and would also resign. Russell Renney had not minded his salary cut in these dire times, but the town council took further action and voted him to be personally responsible for maintaining the fire equipment and organization. That was considered to be an excessive burden and risk to Russell Renney. He and 6 of the firemen resigned in 1929. A Potter, president of the town council, and D Hagelbarger, councilman and fire committee member, were unsympathetic and stated that there were many applicants waiting to fill the vacancies! The resignations stood and a new Fire Chief was selected.



The fire engine on the left is the one that driven by Whitney Herbert and was being used when Russell Renney was the Gulfport Fire Chief. The city council expected Renney to take a pay cut and also to maintain this engine at his own expense!

This photo was taken in the 1930's after Russell Renney had resigned from the Fire Department. It is doubtful that any of these persons were held personally responsible for maintaining the equipment!

Edgar W Renney, son of Sam P and Margaret Gross was also an important contributor to Florida's economy. Edgar and his wife, Katherine Haley, owned Renney's Retail Smoked Fish Store at John's Pass, Madeira Beach. The Renney's had developed a sauce and smoked fish spread that was so delicious that many customers would order it by parcel post. They had 2000 customers who were winter visitors and who they would ship smoked fish to while the customers were living up north. For some "smelly" reason, the postal officials placed an embargo on shipping some food products by parcel post. The Renney family suffered a major setback, but over the course of the next year, Edgar and Kathy developed a smoked fish spread that could be sealed in jars and would keep safely for 5 weeks or more. It was an ideal cocktail and sandwich spread. The product included a base of ground smoked mullet, mixed with cottonseed oil; tomato puree, vinegar, onions, sugar, lemon juice, salt and spices! The Renney's won back their customers and added many new ones!

There are other stories and a lot of vital statistics (more than 20 pages) regarding birth, marriage, and death dates for the Renney family and their associated families in the Pinellas Pioneer microfilms at Largo Library, and in the files of the Gulfport Historical Museum.

Some of the Renney associated surname families on record are:

Black	Gage	Lavance	Sanders
Bonifer	Greene	Leggette	Schoenfeld
Chaffey	Gross	Lowe	Sjstrom
Daughtery	Hales	Martin	Slaughter
Dean	Haley	McInally	Thompson
Dixon	Keddie	McIntosh	Webster
Ezell	Knight	Nash	Young
Freeman	Larrimer	Ownbey	

Sources for this article include:

- William S Renney of Parrish, Florida.
- Gulfport Historical Museum
- Largo Library, Pinellas Pioneers microfilms.