

FLORIDA HALL OF FAMER KNOWN BY MANY UP HERE 02/22/00

Many of the people I have written about in this column have been known for their outstanding characteristics. My subject for this column is no exception. She possesses more of them than most people and has displayed them longer than most people.

She is Dessie Smith Prescott, 93 year-old Florida native and previous long-time local resident. Many locals will recall both she and her late husband, Howard Prescott, as popular League Club members.

They built a home on Little Moose Lake in the late 60s. When Howard died in 1987, it ended 26 years of marriage – years spend traveling the world doing what they both enjoyed – hunting and fishing. These activities were shared with many local residents, myself included. I considered them both to be two of the best and loyal friends I ever had.

My admiration and respect is apparently well founded as witnessed by a recent event. On November 15, 1999, Mrs. Prescott was inducted into the Florida's Women's Hall of Fame by Governor Jeb Bush.

“Each year the Florida Commission on the Status of Women is challenged by the responsibility of selecting the names of 10 meritorious women to forward to the Governor for his consideration. The pool of nominees for the Hall of Fame has always been very competitive and this year was no exception.”

Dessie was born in 1906 when Florida was still a frontier and far from the tourist mecca it is today. Her father was murdered when she was three and her mother was lost during the flu epidemic.

Uncle Ben Morrison introduced her to the woods and waters at an early age. He had his five-year-old niece retrieving quail from the snake infested brush. After her mother's passing, she lived with an aunt and uncle until her independent ways led to an impasse with her aunt.

Striking off on her own, the indomitable spirit that characterized 93 years of life manifested itself in earnest. It led through a succession of occupations, but never too long or far from her passion for hunting and fishing. She did it all – waitressing, hog farming, cattle ranching, real estate sales, guiding sportsmen, and operating a shooting preserve – to name a few.

Some of her most noteworthy accomplishments were serving in the Women's Army

Corps during World War II; the first female licensed pilot and first professional woman guide.

To quote a statement attributed to a recent Florida newspaper article by her, "When you find yourself on a back road that doesn't lead anywhere, take another road, follow a new path."

An inspiration to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, she became an early friend to the author upon her arrival in Florida. Dessie was asked by her uncle to drop by and help "the nice northern couple." He recognized that the couple was ill equipped to manage living in then-rural Florida.

They became fast friends and Dessie gave Marjorie moral support, along with her other suggestions, when her husband left her. She shared an Alaskan boat trip with the couple in 1937 before their breakup. Rawlings describes a camping trip the two women took in her book *Cross Creek*. In a chapter titled "Hyacinth Drift" Rawlings describes Dessie as follows: "She was born and raised in rural Florida, and guns and campfires and fishing rods and creels are corpuscular in her blood."

Most of what I have related was ancient history long before we ever became acquainted. It has been gleaned from personal conversations with her and countless newspaper clippings.

She related one incident in particular to me about her association with Rawlings that gives one insight into the indomitable spirit that I mentioned earlier.

A housemaid of the author's had a boyfriend of questionable character and reputation who was lingering about after a recent prison stint. A pushy character, he became abusive and threatening when Marjorie refused to loan him her car. Dessie quickly assessed the situation and, as she put it to me, "drew down on the dude."

As one Old Forge regular who is long gone, so aptly ended most conversations, "to be continued."