



PINELLAS

The Wells of the Ostrich Farm in St Petersburg

by *Charlie Grandmaison*

This story begins on a large plantation owned by the Wells family in the state of Virginia. Captain Wesley Wells of Valdosta, Georgia had five sons. When the family plantation was sold, each of the sons received a share of the income. Son Jerry, took his share and headed out to travel abroad.

This was Jerry W Wells, who was born in Valdosta, Georgia and who married Esther (---) Wells of Kansas City, Kansas. While visiting in France, Jerry was particularly impressed when he witnessed an ostrich race, with men riding on and guiding these huge birds! Jerry Wells bought eleven ostriches and had them shipped to the USA. He began by racing and exhibiting the long neck, long leg birds at state fairs and other celebrations. It was a hectic way of life involving a lot of travel.

Jerry and Esther decided to settle down in one place. They chose St Petersburg, Florida and came here in 1908 with seven of the big birds. At that time there were only a few blocks to the young city. A single trolley track ran all the way out to the Gulfport pier from downtown St Petersburg. There was a large baseball park about halfway, near to 40th Street south. Jerry Wells leased some 20 acres next to that baseball park, and built a nine foot high fence around the property.



Jerry W Wells riding in his cart behind an ostrich.

He then had cages built to contain monkeys, bears, wildcats, skunks, and other native wildlife, as well as a large alligator pit. Numerous picnic tables complemented the décor of the park. A racetrack was built for the ostriches, and two small Asian boys were hired to ride the huge birds! Ostriches have very dangerous and sharp claws. In order to mount the birds, their heads had to first be covered over with a bag or a hood. Once the bird's eyes were covered over, they remained docile!?! A harness was then placed on their body and the riders were able to mount the birds. When the bird's heads were uncovered, they were ready to run and race.

The Wells family sold souvenirs on the Ostrich Farm, but the main source of income was from selling the bird's feathers. Milliners bought all of the plumes that the Wells could produce from their flock and used them to decorate hats. The Wells family even sold hollowed out ostrich eggshells, some of which were decoratively painted! Entire classes of school children would fill a trolley car to go for a day at the Ostrich Farm. Sometimes Mrs Wells would scramble an egg for the children, and feed as many as thirty with one egg! Jerry Wells also liked to ride in parades pulled in a wagon by one of his ostriches. He appeared in the Washington's Birthday Parades that were the precursor to the Festival of States Parades that came later!

The Farm operated for five years until a raging fire destroyed their home and most of the animals and birds. The fire wiped them out financially in 1914. They were able to rebuild their home, but the Ostrich Farm era was over.

There were two children born into the Wells family while the farm was in operation. Louise was born 31 May 1910, and Margaret was born in February 1913. After the fire, the Wells rebuilt their home in St Petersburg and had two more children here. Mary was born in August of 1914, and Jerry W Junior was born November 1924. There are descendants of the Wells family in Pinellas County, and in other parts of Florida.

That is some of the story of Jerry and Esther Wells, unique and interesting Pinellas County Pioneers. For more information on Pinellas Pioneers, please visit the Largo Library, Special Collections Genealogy area and the Local History section of the library. There is also a lot of Pinellas County history to be found at the Heritage Park Library in Seminole.

Portions of this story came from:

St Petersburg Times, 1980.

St Petersburg and It's People, by Walter P Fuller.

Pinellas Pioneers Microfilm, Largo Library.

Do you descend from or are related to a Pinellas Pioneer Family? To learn more about these families, see the Pinellas Pioneers Microfilm, created by the Pinellas Genealogy Society and stored for public use at Special Collections, Largo Library. See a volunteer at the Genealogy Desk to view the microfilm. The microfilm contains over 50,000 names in more than 25,000 pages and is a MUST SEE for descendants, relations, and historians of Pinellas County Pioneer Families. See page 7, Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 2000 edition of The Pinellas Genealogist for a more complete description of contents of the microfilm.