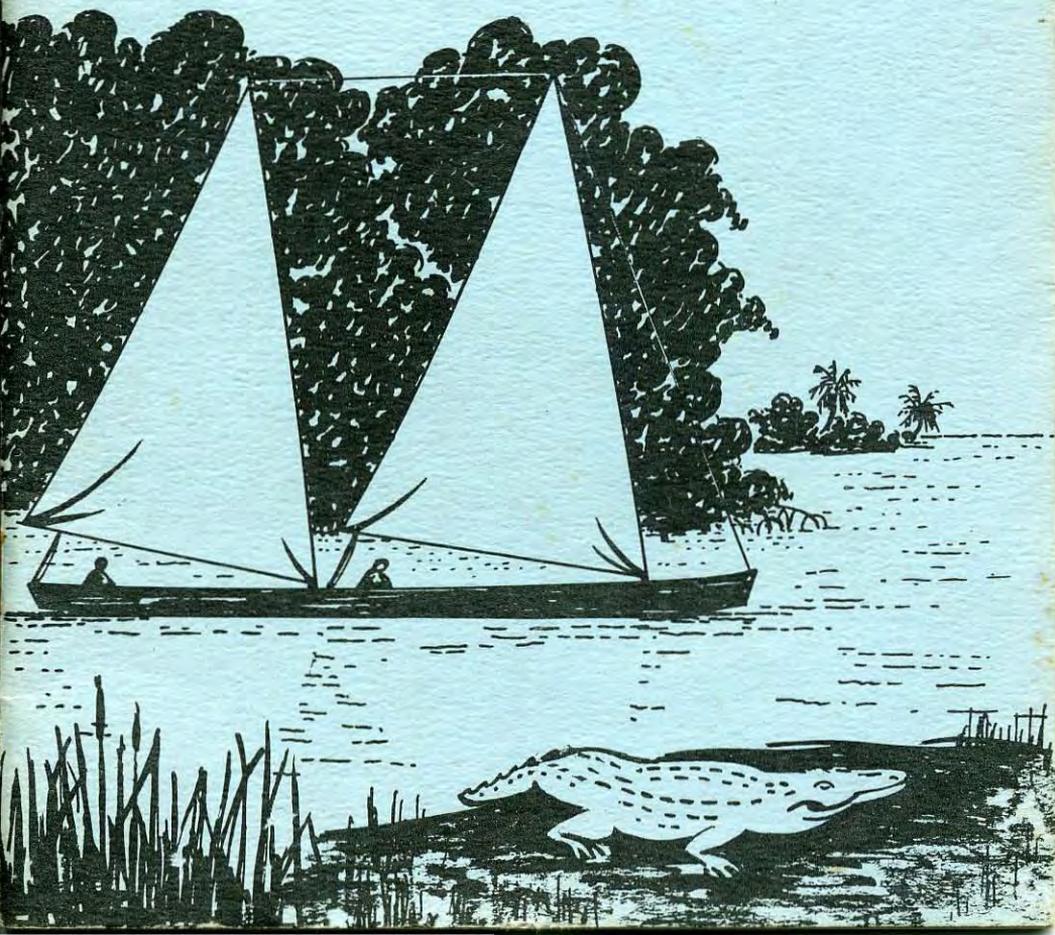


# ESTERO, FLA.

## 1882

**Memoirs of the first settler**  
by  
Capt. E. E. Damkohler



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**Memoirs of the first settler**

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Cover by John Taylor

Island Press • Fort Myers Beach, Florida 33931

To my father, Gustave G. Damkohler

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Captain Elwin E. Damkohler, age 21.

Gustave G. Damkohler, wife and four children - first settlers of Estero Creek, Florida - arrived at Punta Rassa on April 3, 1882. A sign on the south end of the dock read: "This is the end of the world - jump right off." After storing some of our goods, Captain Peter Nelson's steamer *Spitfire* bore us to Fort Myers where we obtained a room on the second floor over Charley Braman's livery.

That was eighty-five years ago and I am the only living survivor of this first Estero homesteading. Since then the land has changed hands and is presently being made into a State Park. Much of the 320 acres bought originally by my father from the State is now called the Koreshan State Park.

Father named the place Estero after the Estero Creek which ran through it.

My brother was the first child born at Estero. Father named him Estero Ostego Damkohler, for that is the name of the creek and bay into which the creek flows. Lately the bay has been called Estero Bay.

Father, and a surveyor named Singletary, located the land and chose a tent site on April 8, 1882.

By the time mother and the children arrived, a tent and tarpaulin had been set up to receive our food stuff and dishes.

I can remember that trip well, even though I was but four years old. Everything was new to me. Birds sitting on their nests attracted my attention. Nor did they leave their nests as I approached. I remember I picked up a bird and ran to show it to my mother. She reprimanded me, ordering me to return it to the nest immediately. This I did, retracing my footprints in the sand. There were seagulls, eagles, small birds and alligators everywhere. New noises, new sights were on every side.

On the trip over we stopped at Matanzas Pass for lunch. After our meal, with the tide and the wind in our favor, we continued our journey. Soon we were at Mound Key where we spent the night. Early the next morning we transferred our pots and pans and other household equipment into skiffs and headed for our newly purchased land.

It was the 10th of April, 1882 when father and my half brother Herman pitched the big tent where we were to live. Under the water-proof tarpaulin in front of the tent, our food, dishes and cooking utensils were stored. Nearby was the stove and long crude table made of pitch wood. Pine board seats were placed around the table. Father did his best to make things as handy as possible for mother who was to do the cooking for all of us.

Father and Herman worked all day while we kids had the time of our lives.

Father, mother and Herman put up hammocks for us children to sleep in. They made crude beds of boughs and logs for themselves. They took care of the bees immediately so they could begin to produce honey. Father was sure this would be our first food and provide us with a good income in our Florida home.

Finally settled, the next important project was to clear some land and plant vegetables. Cow peas or black-eyed peas were

planted along with sweet potatoes called "four-to-the-hundred." These, father had been told, would produce four to the plant, some weighing as much as 25 pounds if properly cared for and fertilized. They would provide us much good eating for their taste was like our present-day yams.

Father's next decision was what to choose for a money crop. What, he wondered, would best produce a living for a family of six in this part of Florida. Father pondered the question until a visitor arrived who was interested, too, in a possible money crop in the area.

The visitor, James A. Wadell, who had big land holdings at Cape Sable to the south of us, and father discussed the matter for a couple of days. After much talk, they decided that coconuts would be best for Cape Sable and pineapples would be best for Estero.

After preparing the land, father sailed to Caxambas. There he bought pineapple sprouts from a Mr. Ludlow. Returning, he set out the sprouts as instructed, mulched them heavily with pine needles since the land was a little dry, added oak leaves to keep them moist and waited. Soon he was pleased to see them growing nicely.

But some time later when father and Herman were away on a trip, a woods fire started. Mother and we kids tried unsuccessfully to stop its going into the pine patch where father had planted the heavily-mulched pineapples. We saved only a few. These few were coming along when the next catastrophe arrived. A large drove of wild cattle pulled out the remaining buds. This finished our pineapple crop which we had counted on to bring us about five hundred dollars.

How the woods fire started we couldn't be sure, but in those

days cattlemen often set fires to make new green pastures for their cattle. We also believed it was to keep homesteaders out, so that their range land could be unlimited.

Father traveled to Key West to ask the county commissioners to help control these fires. He was told, "The cattlemen are boss. We can't do anything about it."

He then wrote a letter to the Hon. Governor Bloxton seeking his help. The Governor replied that this was a local condition. Help would have to come from the county commissioners. The early settlers had to get along as best they could against all odds with little, if any, help.

At this time, our county was Monroe, with Key West the county seat, more than 125 miles south of Estero. When the weather conditions were unfavorable, the round trip by small sailboat, our only mode of transportation, took two to three weeks.

Fires were not the only means used by cattlemen to keep out the homesteaders. Murder was a means also. Criminals used the area for hideouts. I became acquainted with one such, a generous, fine-looking man, freely treating on first sight. But he had his own way of driving away those he disliked.

He kept a pile of sun-bleached human skeletons in his back yard. One glance and the stranger who intended to intrude on this little kingdom got the meaning and wandered on to set up his own plume-hunting, boot-legging or alligator hide operation.

Though father's pineapple crop was a total loss, Mr. James A. Wadell had better luck with his coconuts. I learned some years later that these began to bear after 12 years and continued to do so for about 50 years. They brought an annual income to Mr. Wadell of some \$25,000 above all losses and

expenses. He became president of the large Miami bank where I paid him a call when I needed a loan.

During a pleasant visit he told me of his success with his Cape Sable coconuts.

He sold his holdings for more than \$500,000 when Cape Sable was included in the Everglades National Park. So his success was complete while ours was something far less. Still father struggled on to make a living for his family.

Obediah J. Pettit and his sister came to a place near us called Coconut Grove and bought forty acres of land and got father to help him build a cabin shack for their home. Their location was right on the edge of Estero Bay where they could observe all the fish and turtles of the bay. Having noticed loggerhead and green turtles and diamond back and gopher dry land turtles, Pettit suggested that he and father buy a turtle net and catch green and loggerhead turtles for the market. It looked like a very good business deal. So they bought 600 feet of turtle netting and set it out, gathering the contents every other day. They built pens for the catches and held the turtles until buyers came around every other week. This went on for some time satisfactorily. But turtles became fewer and fewer until the business went into the red.

Soon, green and loggerhead turtles quit coming into Estero Bay and only came onto our outside beaches to lay their eggs before the full moon in May and again in July, laying 100 to 150 eggs each time. That was the most interesting and busiest time of the year. Hunting turtle eggs, night and day, we would be miles from where our boat was and would find a turtle we wanted for its meat. In those cruel, primitive days of 1884, we tied a rope on the inside of its flipper and made the turtle carry one of us to its slaughtering place.

One night father and I went turtle egg hunting and found a fresh crawl. The mother turtle had already gone back into the Gulf of Mexico before we had found her crawl. Father was ahead of me and he had found one egg. Looking up to where the eggs were supposed to be, there stood a black bear helping himself to the turtle eggs. The wind was quite strong and the light was rather poor and the bear seemed to be coming right for us. Father put his arm out to me saying, "No use for us to run." He had a small hand ax and we stood our ground. Minutes turned into hours it seemed as the bear staggered back and forth before us. We waited. Father held the ax high. The bear swayed forward. Just then the moon slipped from behind a cloud. Father burst out laughing. I rubbed my eyes in astonishment. Our "bear" had suddenly become a tall shrub, swaying in the wind!

Father had discovered a nice spring of good flowing water on the south side of Estero Creek. He decided to move his family over there. The natural conditions were much better for all of us and the fire risks were fewer. The spring, which provided our drinking water, became our greatest treasure.

The spring was brought close to our home through the practical inventive mind of our father. By deepening and widening a section of the stream, father provided a safe pool for bathing.

We used the water again where it dropped into a basin at the outlet into Estero Creek. Here we were able to trap fish. If we found too many fish for our use when we visited the pond, we opened the gate devised by my father and let some out.

Father was no fisherman but he knew how to get plenty of good eating fish for food, and this was necessary for our livelihood.

Our chickens and our Italian honey bees had not done well in South Florida. The bees proved disappointing, not so much be-

cause of the climate, but because it was necessary to find a market to sell the honey. This was 35 or more miles away.

Transportation proved to be our greatest difficulty. Our only means were small boats. Around our home, a simple row or poling boat was used. When it was necessary to sail farther afield to get supplies or attend to business, we rigged the boat with sails.

This made a handy, fast boat and the type used in this area from 1880 to 1920. The extremely shallow draft made it perfect for shallow waters. If the tide was too low to maneuver, we simply clambered out of the boat, did some oystering, crabbing, clamming, climbed a tree for bird eggs or chased alligators. By lying down in the boat, a nap was possible until the tide changed and we could sail on.

The most popular shallow draft, larger freight boats of the 1880's until the 1920's were called Sharpies. They did most of the local shallow water freight business of those times. Sometimes passengers were carried as these boats were the only commercial transportation.

The shapes of hulls and sails differed slightly, but the shallow draft was the important feature. A sharpie of 34 to 40 feet with a beam of nine feet would carry a cargo of about three tons and leave room for about six passengers.

Another popular boat was like the sharpie, but with no centerboard. It was so arranged to use sails when there was any wind, and the sailing and handling ability in stormy weather was remarkable. When the wind was too strong, we took out the sprit pole, and tied down the peak of the sail. This shortened the sail area. The sprit pole was a stick with a fork which held the top corner (peak) of the four-sided sail up and away

from the mast. Removing the pole dropped the peak, folding the sail nearly in half, into a triangular shape. If the wind was still too strong, we took down the jib sail, and in hurricane winds, all sails came down and you rode out the storm as best you could. These boats used lee boards instead of center boards and were wonderful sail boats. They were called Fish Rigs when used with sails and just plain row boats when with oars alone.

Life was pleasant in those days. If it was difficult, we children were unaware of this. Occasionally hazardous experiences occurred. One night mother heard an unusual noise in the distance. It got louder as time went on. Father said, "I believe we're in for an Indian attack."

We readied ourselves for the best possible defense, with rifles, double-barreled shot guns and a Colt revolver. My sister Mary and I were delegated to help reload the guns. We doused our lamp and waited with fear and trembling.

Suddenly the noise of screaming hoot owls and their fluttering wings was heard right at us. We were mistaken in fearing an Indian attack, but could hardly believe what was taking place before our eyes.

One dejected hoot owl on the ground was being screamed at and pecked by those surrounding him. The condemned owl attempted to escape from his tormentors by trying to fly or run. The flock would fly with more screams and pecks at the unfortunate owl. What the bird had done to deserve this treatment we could not guess.

A few days later we did see Indians, but they proved to be completely friendly. Appearing at our home quite suddenly was an Indian chief, Uncle Tarman, as we knew him to be named.

He brought venison which he wished to trade for honey, grits, bacon and other goods. We became good friends and always welcomed this tall, kind man when he appeared carrying game of some kind or other across his broad shoulders.

The Chief asked father if he could make his camp about one-half mile from our home and father gave him permission to do this. This pleased me greatly for the Chief had a son a little older than myself. We became friendly and I learned much from him about the Indian language, their ways and their customs.

I learned their tricks in harpooning fish and their way of handling canoes. I learned, too, their ways of silently disappearing and of back-walking when faced by the enemy. I learned how to find food in the wilderness of South Florida, the Everglades.

Five months later, the Chief came to bid us goodbye. He said, "Me no come back. Me go to Happy Hunting Ground." We never saw him again. I missed my friend greatly.

One day father had to pick up some freight from Punta Rassa. He had ordered more guns and ammunition to make him feel he could protect his family better. The guns arrived as ordered. He uncrated them and tried them out so they would be ready on the trip home if necessary.

When the tide was right, father started on his homeward journey. The weather was fine. The water was smooth. He rowed along with pleasant thoughts of better protection for his home in the wilderness.

Suddenly there was a great splashing in the water on all sides of his little boat. He found himself surrounded by devil-fish, the Manta. They circled the boat, laying their flippers first on one side, then the other, splashing and soaking father thoroughly as he fought to keep the boat upright.

Thoroughly frightened, father began to shoot at the fish with his new rifle as fast as he could. He was sure he was confronted with certain death. Finally the wind picked up in his favor, blowing his boat away from the ray fish and toward home.

This experience so unnerved father that for several days he was in a critical condition. This happened on February 5, 1883, a day the whole family long remembered as Father's Terrible Experience.

One day when father was busy with his bees, he found a smart little wren had made a nest in his tool box where he kept his smoker and other bee equipment. He removed these things so that Mother Wren could raise her family. Soon three little eggs appeared - and, a little later, three little birds.

Mrs. Wren, recognizing a friend in father, liked to light upon his wrist. She would twitter and twitter until he gave her bee drones for her babies. She would then sit near-by and chatter gaily until the next feeding time.

When exercise time came, the young wrens decided to fly across the creek at a spot about 100 feet wide. Two made a successful flight. The third landed under the sloping bank on the far side, a little above the water and in such a location that it was impossible to get out without falling into the water.

Mother Wren flew to us and twittered. Several times she flew agitatedly over and alighted upon my hand. Between each landing she flew across the creek.

Deciding she was in trouble, or her young birds were, I got in the boat, found and rescued the little bird as the mother had hoped I would. We lived very close to nature in those days. It was up to us to help each other.

Many strange things happened in this area. Several times we saw a common sea gull whip the life out of a bald eagle.

The majestic eagle, snatching food from the little gull, came off the loser on the three occasions I have witnessed.

The insulted gull turned on the eagle. Flying just above the eagle's back, staying in the wave of the huge bird's air flow, the gull continually pecked the eagle on the head, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other. The eagle was forced to fly in a circle.

This continued for about an hour, each time I saw it. The eagle, finally exhausted, sought shelter in the dense brush. It never came out. It died there eventually.

I tried to feed and revive one of these whipped bald eagles. But the eagle, thus disgraced, seemed no longer to wish to live. Death was preferred to the humiliation of defeat by an insignificant sea gull.

Bob cats shared our area too. One day while fishing from a log bridge built over Estero Creek, I looked up to see a big wild cat watching me. It was clear to me that she wanted to get by me on the bridge.

I made a dash for my pistol, took a shot at the cat and missed. She bounded into the bush. I continued fishing. While I was busy landing a catch, that bob cat flew across the bridge, brushing past me to the other side. This was all it wanted to do in the first place. I have never seen a cat move so fast in my life.

My second experience with an Estero Creek panther was some years later. I was at the headwaters of the creek with my big Cuban blood hound. This was near Mosquito Pen where the cowboys rounded up their cattle for branding.

Finding a comfortable place to spend the night, I cut some palm leaves, found a supply of pitchwood for my fire and lay

down to sleep. My dog's whining awakened me. Knowing he was afraid of nothing except panther and bear, I decided to light my fire to see what was wrong.

In the light of the fire, two big eyes shone from the darkness. I drew a bead on them. My shot was correct. There lay a big panther whose prey was my dog. Only I was in the way.

The great grey whooping crane of those days was one of the of the most interesting birds to us. The full-grown male, often standing five feet high, had a wing spread of eight feet or more. These birds were our friends in many ways.

They dug out grub worms, underground moles and insects injurious to our crops. They offered us a certain amount of protection too, for their shrill whooping call alerted us to danger or newcomers who sometimes appeared without warning.

When nesting time arrived, the whooping crane selected a high, dry spot with short oak scrub bushes. Male and female worked together until egg-laying time when the male would stand guard for the female. When the eggs were layed, the cranes took short turns, each going to feed while the other stood guard, returning so that no time elapsed when their eggs or young were unprotected.

One afternoon mother told me to go see what was bothering an old hen. She had hidden her nest at the end of a brush heap. I climbed the brush pile, leaping down the far side. While I was still in the air, a big panther jumped from under me. Next day Mr. Dave Pool and others, with hunting dogs, treed the panther in a cypress. A shot brought it down. The huge cat measured 11 feet from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail.

The abundance of wild life never failed to fascinate us kids. We were not afraid. We did not realize the danger as our parents

did. Bellowing male alligators, the grunts of the mother 'gators and the distress grunts of the young 'gators, we learned to recognize. We knew too, the screams of the panthers, the growling of bears, the hissing of wild cats, the mouthings of raccoons and the croaks of the bull frogs.

We learned to imitate the sounds and those of the lowing wild cows. Game was plentiful. Deer came right into our camp to lick the salt out of our dishes.

Mosquitoes we kept away by wood, kindled so that the resulting fire produced a great amount of smoke. At times deer sought refuge from insects in the drifting smoke from our fires.

Occasionally hunters appeared, bent on taking animals for their skins and choice cuts of venison. They left the rest of the meat with us. This we salted and dried so it would last.

Fishing in Estero Creek often had its surprises. When I threw in my two-pronged gig expecting to bring up a fish, I sometimes got a baby alligator, grunting in desperation for its mother.

Other alligators came to investigate one of their kind calling for help. The mother alligator, without hesitation, attacks the molestor.

We children were so used to alligators that we bathed quite close to them. While my two sisters were in the water, I stood guard as they did for me when I was bathing. If a 'gator got too close we called to each other to get out. This was our way of playing hide and seek with alligators when we were five and six years old.

We learned much about alligators. We learned that this reptile fiercely guards her young. That her eggs are layed in clutches of 16 to 20 in a nest close to the water in tall grassy

areas. We watched the mother 'gator guard the nest until the eggs hatched, then take the little ones to water and guard them with her life.

When a wildfire approached, we saw the mother 'gator remain, burning to death rather than leave her eggs to escape to the nearby water.

I once found 16 very young 'gators. I put them in my boat in shallow water. Soon there was a scratching sound. The mother 'gator was almost in my skiff. I moved quickly, shoving out my oar, manuevering into deep water. The little 'gators kept calling for their mother who was determined to get aboard and save them.

The first night we spent on the south side of Estero Creek, we lost our dog to the alligators. Only the head was bitten off. We found the remainder of the body near by.

Hunters who sometime catch tailless 'gators often can't figure what has happened. But I have seen tail-twisting alligators at mating time, early in the summer.

Then, the male alligators have a contest. Lying full length on the surface, bellowing repeatedly as they approach each other, the male moves in until each is in easy reach of the other's tail. The faster of the two grabs, with a flash, this appendage which is about three feet behind the rear legs. Then begins the tail twisting with full power until the weaker one loses. The loser in the tail twisting contest slinks away, burying himself in a mudbank until nature has repaired his damaged part. I have never seen alligators fight with jaws crossed in combat as is sometimes shown in pictures.

Florida alligators bask in pleasant, warm sunshine with their mouths wide open. Flies, small birds and insects are

drawn to this great gaping opening whereupon the 'gator closes its jaws, gulps down the mouthful of whatever has wandered in, then the operation is completed and repeated.

Life continued pleasantly for the Damkohler family but not for long. February 16, 1884, about four a.m., mother died. Father had come home late that evening to find her sick. All night he tried to relieve her pain but he knew it was useless. He awakened us children to kiss her goodbye. Our two-weeks old baby had been in mother's arms all the while she was sick.

Father got help from the neighbors to saw some pine boards for her coffin. He buried her close to our cabin shack. He placed a large native stone on each side as permanent grave markers for the future.

It was now up to father to find food for the baby. Baby food of any kind was nowhere to be found but father was a German doctor of wide experience. He warmed water, adding a few drops of good brandy and a little honey. He fed the baby two to three teaspoonfuls whenever the little one was awake. He also soaked the brine from salt pork, forming it into a nipple, giving it to the baby to nurse.

Father had already given me baby care instruction. He taught me how to use our guns in case of attack from any source. He taught me how to swim. Now, at not quite five years of age, I became acting part-time father and mother, performing the duties of each as needed. I even learned to bake bread, sew, do general cooking, and other household duties.

It was about this time that father's finances grew low. He was forced to borrow \$200 from a cousin in Missouri. When he had funds, he had to go to Fort Myers for baby food and other essentials. He used our little fish rig boat, but he was no

sailor and did not know how to tack against the wind. He rowed, poled or jumped over board and towed the skiff along the shore line, doubling the distance. The trip took nine days to find only half the food he needed for the baby.

The trip had to be repeated every two weeks. When the weather was good, only five days were required.

A short time thereafter, the stranger arrived. He bought 20 acres of father's land for \$200. This land lay along the west end of Estero Creek, about a half mile from our home.

The stranger was friendly. He offered to stay with us children while father made trips for baby food and supplies. His assistance was welcomed by father who worried about the care of us youngsters. We enjoyed the different meals the stranger cooked for us. He did things to amuse us, too.

This "Mr. X." had the mind of an inventor. He found four trees spaced just right on the land he bought from father to provide four corners of a home he intended to build. These he topped just eight feet above the ground to foil the large wild animals that roamed at night or that might be tempted to get into his supplies while he was away.

He found his building materials right on the spot. Cypress trees provided floor joists, rafters and siding. We couldn't help wonder what he would use for flooring. Then we found that he took the stems of native palm trees, nailed them round side down, exposing the flat side as the smooth floor surface. We thought "Mr. X." quite ingenious.

Soon, however, our suspicions were aroused. It became clear that "Mr. X" had an ulterior motive. He had a friend and he wanted father to marry this friend. Father hesitated. He said he needed time to deliberate.

Not long afterward, our baby brother showed signs of illness. Then the other children became sick. Father could not determine the cause. He called in an English doctor. Neither could diagnose the ailment.

Two months later our baby brother died. Then my youngest sister, and a little while later, my oldest sister died. I was a walking skeleton. Father and the other doctor were prepared for my death which they felt would surely come.

But I did not die. I overcame the poison which the diabolical "Mr. X." had introduced into our food. His scheme was revealed two years later. He had poisoned us children with white lead.

His plan was to have father marry his friend before suffering a like fate. "Mr. X." and his friend would then have 300 acres along Estero Creek worth about \$25,000 at that time. When it became evident that I would live, "Mr. X." disappeared.

Father and I, both exhausted from these harrowing happenings, decided to take a trip down the coast in our little skiff sailboat for a complete rest.

Prior to mother's death, father had been given many valuable and rare trees from his friend, Baron Von Müller of Austria. The two had spent many pleasant hours discussing agriculture and other subjects.

The baron had imported olive trees, three kinds of mulberry, eucalyptus of three varieties including the bottle brush and cajeput, pomegranates and such other fruit trees as orange, Key lime, lemon, sapodilla and guavas which he gave to father.

We had planted these and could not be gone too long for they needed our care. Our first stop was at Naples where some men were clearing sites for building. Out of food and hungry, father

and I went to near by Clam Pass, where we gathered clams, caught fish and found some cabbage palm buds to eat.

We continued our trip down the coast. Marco was the next rest stop. We visited old Gomas, at Gomas Key. Gomas, over 95 years of age, had been Gasparilla's cabin boy.

Juan Gomas had some nice bearing coconut trees. Father asked the cost of two good ones to eat. Gomas said five cents. When father said this was reasonable, the old man climbed the 20-foot tree to select two nice eating coconuts for us. (Editor's note: Juan Gomas also spelled Gomez.)

Our next stop was at Mr. Storter's Indian post in Chokoluskee Bay. One of the passes we had to go through on the way was called Hellgate. Father told Mrs. Storter that I would arrive as soon as I had tied up the boat. He introduced himself as Gustave Damkohler. I took longer to arrive than expected and Mrs. Storter said to father, "Why isn't that Hellkohler boy here yet?" This confusion in identity amused father no end.

About this time, a man named Captain Danielson homesteaded at a good location on a creek called Oger Hole at the south end of Estero Bay. He was a boat builder and an all-around mechanic and engineer. Father and Mr. Danielson got the job of surveying Mound Key so that Frank M. Johnson could homestead there.

I was about nine years old then. They made me flag man for the surveyors, a job which made me very proud. I would set the flag as directed, then climb a tree and go to sleep until the surveyors came to me and started me out on another jaunt. We completely surveyed the entire island which meandered to the government mainland lines.

Father and I lived a more or less routine life for quite some

time when one day he said, "Let's go to Fort Myers and spend Christmas and New Year's with Ewald Stulpner." This was a German friend of father's who was in charge of the Edison place. This we did, staying there until the third day of January 1894.

It was on the afternoon of January 4, 1894 that we arrived at Punta Rassa on our trip home. There we met Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, Mrs. A.G. Ordway, Mrs. L.M. Boomer and Mary Mills.

Father and Dr. Teed engaged in conversation about lands for a "New Jerusalem" that Dr. Teed had come from Chicago to Florida to found. They were in conversation until far into the night. Then they all decided to go to our Estero home.

We did not have enough food for four additional persons at our home. The next morning we went to the St. James food store on Pine Island. I was designated sailor to handle the boat.

While passing an oyster bar where many birds were feeding, Dr. Teed, founder of the Koreshan Unity, who claimed to be the second Christ, drew his pistol. He shot at the birds, two of which were wounded and crippled.

This act decided my future feelings for this man. Though he continued to try to win me over, he then and there lost any hypnotical, religious influence over me.

Father and mother had taught us never to kill or harm any animal or bird unless it was needed by us. Here, the would-be "second Christ" was shooting and crippling birds for fun. I felt this was a ridiculously impossible thing for the "saviour of mankind" to do.

We got the needed food at the Pine Island store and returned to Punta Rassa where we spent the night. Early the next morning, we started for our home at Estero Creek. When we arrived, we

gave Dr. Teed and his women folk our house. Father and I slept in our little boat which was arranged with sleeping quarters.

While Dr. Teed was our guest, he showed us his plans for his New Jerusalem. He had a big, beautiful map showing the streets of his dream place. Father's place was to be the center with streets running in all directions about like the streets from the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Teed pretended to be the saviour of mankind and the second Christ. He said that anyone who did as he directed and gave all he had to him and followed his teachings all of his life would receive eternal life.

This and many other things, he promised my father. He promised him lifetime care, schooling for me and care for me until I became of age at twenty-one.

The women pampered father and me. They made good progress with my father but not with me, because Dr. Teed could not hypnotize me. The more he influenced my father, the more I hated him.

After days of hypnotic influence, he got father to start writing a deed conveying 300 acres of our property, holding out 20 acres for me.

Dr. Teed's handwriting was illegible. My father's was almost perfect. So, Dr. Teed made father do all the writing of the deed papers. Yet he was not satisfied.

He told father that he could not get the full blessing of the Lord and the Koreshan religion unless he gave all his possessions to the Lord.

Teed's hypnotic influence won. I, my father's only living child, was disinherited. The remaining 20 acres were deeded to Dr. Cyrus R. Teed.

A few nights later, we were sleeping in our little boat. Suddenly, father came out of this hypnotic spell. He cried like a baby, realizing what he had done to me.

I was ready to do anything to get rid of Dr. Teed. But the women pampered father and me. We began to do what was necessary for our immediate livelihood. Food had to be produced for six persons.

After father had given Dr. Cyrus R. Teed all of his land and property, he became a body slave to him and the Unity heads. After some time of this, he realized fully that he had been victimized by a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Under cover of a religious mantle of the unusual promises for father and me, such as the great city - New Jerusalem - he was going to build on father's land, Dr. Teed had completely hypnotized my father.

He tried to prove that we lived on the inside of the earth, while using his crooked religious influence. He was just as crooked there as in all his other "wonderful" claims.\*

Dr. Teed was a person who could not hold any legal property in his own name. That is the reason my father's property was made in trust to Mrs. Ordway and Mrs. Boomer for the Koreshan Unity. Dr. Teed, as director, got all the money. He gave his slaves just what he wanted to.

No one could do anything about it except leave without a penny. That is what some of the residents did. Quite a number died there. They were buried in the private cemetery of the Koreshan Unity with Dr. Teed's promise of immortal life.

Though I was but a boy of about 15, I had had so many prac-

\* This "proof" is well described by Dr. Teed in his *Cellular Cosmogony* (The Koreshan Unity, Inc. 1951). *Editor*.

tical experiences in so wide a range that the would-be saviour of mankind often came to me for help. I thought a great deal about his theory concerning cosmogeny and inhabitants living inside the earth.

One day I was bathing on the outside of Estero Island. When my eye was at water level I could see the Sanibel lighthouse, about three miles distant. I knew this lighthouse was about 90 feet high. As I elevated my eye above the water, the lighthouse came into sight. This proved to me that there was a bulge in the water between me and the lighthouse.

I made another practical demonstration to prove to myself that Dr. Teed's theory was all wrong. When the Coast Guard set three light stakes on the ship's channel from the entrance bar to Punta Rassa, a distance of about nine miles, the height of the first light was about ten feet above water level. The second light was the same height above the water. The third light had to be at least twice or three times as high above the water to line the three lights exactly.

This was another proof to me that we lived outside the earth. These lights enabled ships to stay in the channel on dark nights.

Dr. Teed made Mrs. Ordway the Queen of Koreshanity to carry out his orders. Father was put in charge of agriculture. It was his job to furnish honey for all.

One day four men arrived. There was an immediate need for houses. The Queen sent the men to the nearby cypress swamps to get material and to split shakes from sawed blocks for the cypress roofs. One of the men was a doctor. The other three were intent on other subjects, so the house-building project was hampered.

A short time later, a Professor Lameroux came to Estero. He took over the supervision of agricultural activity. Father and the Professor could not agree on the best crops to plant, nor how to grow them. Father then turned the growing of vegetables over to the Professor. Soon, there were no vegetables for anyone to eat.

Father took care of the bees, producing lots of honey for all, and some to spare.

By this time, a second arrival of people came from Beth Ophrah near South Chicago. A sailboat, sent to get groceries, was delayed by weather conditions.

Dr. Teed came to me and said, "Elwin, get us some fish for these people to eat." There were about fifty hungry ones there. I replied, "All right, but what have you to catch them with? There are no hooks, no nets. I can't catch them with my bare hands." He said, "Get the fish."

I remembered it was mullet-spawning time. I asked for two lanterns, two skiffs and a man for each boat. He said, "You are the captain, go get the fish."

So, with two lanterns, one helper and two skiffs, we went to the mouth of Estero Creek. We waited in the darkness of night for the incoming tide. When the tide was almost high, I knew the fish would be spawning in full action.

I had coached my helper to do just as I did. At the exact moment, we pushed the boats into the stream, jerked and swung out lanterns high while knocking on our boats. The fish became frightened. Jumping in all directions, they filled our boats. To this day, I have a lump where one big mullet struck me in the hollow of my left arm.

We were home with the fish in a short time. Everyone who

could, was cleaning mullet. And then, with some helpers, I went to gather swamp cabbage needed to supply us all. Several days later, the supply boat arrived.

Soon after this experience, the doctor bought the 5-ton sloop, the *Ada*, from the old boat builder, Mr. Smith at St. James. Robert Gilbert was made captain. I was general roustabout and helper. When Captain Gilbert quit, Dr. Teed put an old sea captain, Gus Faber, in charge of the sloop. I was made pilot.

One day the weather turned quite bad as we were returning from a trip. The captain would not follow my instructions to stay in the channel. Knowing that he would put the boat on the sand bar and we would be smashed to pieces, I decided to take action.

I locked the captain in the cabin. I took charge of handling the boat myself, bringing it in safely. After docking, I let the captain out of the cabin.

This created quite a stir. It looked rather bad for a boy of my age to lock up my captain on the high seas. After some time, however, I was exonerated. Because I had saved the sloop *Ada*, I got a nice citation.

On another occasion, Dr. Teed and Queen Ordway came aboard the sloop to go to Punta Rassa. Sailing through San Carlos Pass, Captain Faber let the jib rope loose during a strong wind, causing it to make a loud slapping noise and the boat to vibrate.

The Queen and Dr. Teed, who were in the cabin, thought we were sinking. Dr. Teed came on deck wringing his hands and begging me to save them. This made another distinct impression on me, concerning this man.

If the would-be saviour of mankind begged me to save him

just because the ship's captain had let a single rope on a sail-boat get loose, then it was about time for me to get out of the Koreshan hell.

Still later, Queen Ordway told Captain Faber to go after clams at Clam Pass, near Naples. So many clams were gathered that the boat was overloaded and sank during a squall on the way back. The crew got safely ashore but Capt. Faber decided to become a farmer. He took up a homestead on Black Rock I.

Dr. Teed bought a sawmill and had it installed on the easterly end of Estero Island. Mr. Bill Towles and Hugh Seneff drilled a well for a supply of fresh water. Many fine pitch-pine trees, growing on father's land, were cut. Rafts were made of the logs. These were towed to the mill.

The lumber produced was brought back from Estero Island to Estero to build houses. Father helped at the sawmill. I was cook, baker and helper on anything they got stuck on. I was constantly busy.

Dr. Teed had promised me schooling. When two years had elapsed and there was still no school, nor teacher, I renewed my requests. A boy about my own age was appointed to give me lessons in book learning.

This I resented because in all practical ways I was miles ahead of him in learning. I could not stand the humiliation of studying under this boy whom I considered somewhat less than intelligent.

By this time I had decided that I could not agree with the religious doctrines presented by Dr. Teed. I had proved to myself that we lived not on the inside of the earth, but on the outside. I believed that I could prove this to any sane person even though I could not read or write.

I was sure that the success of Dr. Teed's astronomical claims and his equipment set up on the beach near Naples were doubtful. I believed that the majority of his statements were untrue, that most of the figures he used were misquoted. I was sure that almost anyone with a little common sense could prove his discrepancies.

Furthermore, the treatment of his members, and the religious services they were required to participate in, I felt were disgusting. I decided to ask my father to let me go to Fort Myers to get a job and go to school.

Father said, "Well, son, if you want to start out on your own, I will not stand in your way. I have made such a mess of our own home affairs, go with God's blessing."

I took a small bundle of clothing and some food and started out on the sandy trail for Fort Myers, some 16 miles distant.

I found that a Mr. A.A. Gardner was operating a guava canning plant there and asked for a job. I got it the day after my arrival.

Driving a grey horse around the neighborhood. I bought guavas for the canning plant. I also was a general helper. During this time, I also went to school. Miss Minnie and all the Gardners were especially good to me for they knew how Dr. Teed had beaten father and me out of our home at Estero. Miss Minnie helped me with my lessons and I lived with them. It was my new home for a long time.

When the canning season was over, the Gardners gave me a small piece of ground on which to raise my own vegetables. I decided to grow California bell peppers. I wrote to Atlanta, Ga. for seed and growing instructions. The Gardners gave me their used potash for fertilizer. I planned to send my first crop of

peppers to market. When they were ready, I picked and wrapped them in brightly colored paper, and packed them in bushel boxes. Then I sent my crop via express, to New York City.

I anxiously awaited the money I would receive. When it did arrive, I was pleasantly surprised to find the returns considerably larger than I had anticipated.

Later, I learned that I was the first person to ship peppers out of Lee County. I netted some \$250 which I saved. Later I used this money to attend business college.

When the Gardners installed the first electric light plant, I helped with the installation. I operated it half a night while going to school. I was now 17 years old. I had only three more years to finish the remaining seven grades of school. This was in 1896.

Realizing my educational predicament, I consulted my teacher. I asked her if she would let me pass each grade as fast as I could pass the examinations. She agreed. I studied night and day, at work or play, completing many lessons ahead of time. I completed the ninth grade ahead of the other students.

About this time, my father started suit against Mrs. Bertha Boomer and Mrs. A.G. Ordway, as trustees for the Koreshan Unity, and Dr. Cyrus R. Teed. This was September 25, 1907.

The suit dragged along until 1908, when it wound up in a compromise. Father got half of the wild land. He had made a deal with an attorney, Louis Hendry, to give him half of whatever he could get back from the Koreshan Unity.

When the Unity offered to give him back one-half of the un-

improved land, or nothing, father finally accepted the offer. Father was financially unable to continue his suit against the Koreshan Unity. That was why he decided to accept the compromise rather than nothing.

Father ended up with 80 acres of his original 320. He gave me 40 acres and I later sold his 40 for him for \$25 an acre. This \$1,000 helped him start anew at the age of 72.

Father worked about one year at the Koreshan Unity after I left. He had produced much honey for the residents. Those in control would not even give him clothes or food suitable for his physical condition. He was 72 years old when he took a small bundle of his possessions, some matches and a little food and started off for Fort Myers. He traveled along the same sandy trail I had taken previously.

I found father a place to stay. He did some jobs for Louis Hendry, the attorney who had handled his case. Both of us had to start life over again from scratch, after some 17 years.

When I finished my ninth grade course, I decided to take a bookkeeping course at the Georgia-Alabama Business College in Macon. I borrowed \$250 from Miss Minnie Gardner using my 40 acres of land as collateral and off to college I went. This was on the 20th day of May, 1899.

This little booklet covers the twenty-six years from 1882 to 1908. I left Fort Myers to pursue my education in Macon. The booklet's purpose is to preserve the earliest history of Estero, so named by my father Gustave G. Damkohler on April 10, 1882.

Father and I had lived in Estero and Fort Myers 17 years,

Captain Elwin E. Damkohler was born in Shelbyville, Missouri on May 18, 1878 according to the family bible. His father, Gustave, was a native of Berlin, Germany who came to this country by way of Australia. He met Elwin's mother, Alma, in Missouri where they were married and lived for a few years.

Looking for greener pastures, the Damkohler family booked passage on a small auxiliary schooner, the *Lizy Henderson*, out of New Orleans bound for Key West. Due to a perishable cargo, they passed Punta Rassa and went to Key West, returning to their destination on April 3, 1882. This date and location is where this book begins.

Captain Damkohler has had a long and interesting life. From panning gold for three years in Alaska to growing coconut palms near Punta Rassa, his activities cover almost anything one can mention.

He met his wife, Mary Mayton, while working in Quincy, Florida. Later they moved to Fort Myers.

Captain E.E. Damkohler was the second man to guide sports fishermen in Lee County. His headquarters were based at Punta Rassa. His outfit was a row boat. His daily charge was \$2.50. And as the Captain says - there were more fish than he has ever seen before or since, anywhere in the world!