



Photos special to News-Press

MOUND KEY FARM: Grandma Molly Johnson and her husband, Frank, pose on their Mound Key farm in pioneer times. There were about seven families living on Mound Key.

Pioneer family life primitive, hearty

By ANDREA STETSON
News-Press staff writer

There wasn't much but palmettos, scrub brush and wild animals in Bonita Springs when Molly and Frank Johnson, who were among the first settlers in the area, came to Mound Key in the early 1880s.

Molly, known to everyone as Grandma Johnson, was part Cherokee Indian, and her five children were born the Native American way on the island in Estero Bay.

"Granny delivered all of her babies in the garden," explained Mildred Turner, the wife of Johnson's great-grandson. "She would squat in the garden to give birth."

Life was as primitive as it

gets. No neighbors, no running water, no electricity — nothing but brush, trees, shells and their little wooden house sat on that island. But slowly, more pioneers arrived, and Grandma Johnson was always there to welcome them.

Her reputation as the woman who helped everyone is still known by the descendants of many pioneer families. She gave away so much land her husband got mad and temporarily left her. But Grandma Johnson just had to help the new families who arrived on the island, so she would give them property on which to build homes and help settle the land.

While her husband fished, Grandma Johnson raised her children and tended her garden.

"Mound Key was really beautiful then," Turner explained. "She had roses, bushes and fruit trees."

As other families settled and began populating the island with children, the Johnsons helped build a little school-



KORESHAN DOCK: Koreshan men unload a boat full of sweet potatoes at the Koreshan dock at the mouth of the Estero River. The boat, named Curlew, belonged to the Koreshans.

house on Mound Key. The children ran barefoot up and down the mounds of Indian shells, fished and hunted.

Eventually, the youngsters grew up and went on to settle other islands, living in wooden shanties on Black Island and later Big Hickory Island.

Elmer Johnson — son of Hub Johnson and grandson of Grandma Johnson — was one of the first people to live on Big Hickory Island, building his little home on the northern end, which Elmer Johnson said was about 1,000 feet wider back then.

— Eventually the family

moved to Coconut Road, where many of Grandma Johnson's descendants still live today. They set up a fish house and continued the family tradition of fishing.

Their small homes near their boats, scattered among the trees and grass, are in one of the few areas of Bonita Springs that hasn't changed much in the past 100 years. Although the upscale homes in Pelican Landing are just across the road, the fishermen and their families have clung to many of their pioneer ways.

See **FAMILY / 2F**



■ This is the final story in our series about Bonita Springs' first families.

FAMILY: Johnson family is proud of heritage

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Hub's heyday

The Johnson clan is proud of their pioneer heritage, and stories of their ancestors have been passed down through many generations.

Mildred Turner remembers a story about Hub Johnson, Grandma's oldest son. Hub was riding his horse one day and came upon a woman lying in a bloody pool of water.

"She had been scalped," Turner said.

Hub took the woman home and the Johnson family nursed her back to health.

"She was the only woman they ever knew who wore a wig," Turner added.

Hub was the adventurous pioneer in the family, according to his descendants. They say he once chased an outlaw, caught him in the woods and put him in a tree until authorities arrived. They say he could hunt alligators by doing a mating call.

One day, as Hub crawled on his hands and knees bellowing his gator call, an alligator crept up behind him and crawled on Hub's legs.

"Hub never again did the mating call before looking behind him," Turner said.

The Johnsons all were fishermen, and although they were on the water almost every day, they didn't have too many adventures.

But they almost had one tragedy.

Roy Johnson Sr. was 12 years old when he stepped on a stingray as he helped his family shove their boat into deeper water.

"It (the stinger) had gone through his foot and was pulling him along in the water," Turner said.

"It (pioneer life) made it hard on my kids because my kids could never imagine what I've done and seen. You could go as you pleased and do as you want. There were no fences and there was lots of wildlife and fish."

ROY JOHNSON JR.

His father, Elmer, almost didn't notice the injured boy, but at the last second he looked back from his boat and rescued his son.

"He almost bled to death, but he survived," Turner said.

Roy Johnson Jr. lives next door to the little, white, wooden house where he was raised at the end of Coconut Road. He says he's the last generation of Johnsons to live the pioneer life in Bonita Springs.

"It made it hard on my kids because my kids could never imagine what I've done and seen," he said. "You could go as you pleased and do as you want. There were no fences and there was lots of wildlife and fish."

Roy Jr. said his life growing up was not that much different from his ancestors' generations ago, except he was raised in a house with running water and indoor plumbing. He said the biggest changes in the area came in the mid 1970s, when rapid growth forever changed the rugged area he loved best.

"My generation was the last to experience the old days," said

Roy Jr., who was born in 1953. "Back then, Florida was still Florida."

Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, Roy Johnson Jr. grew up on the water. He remembers being just a toddler when he began going on fishing expeditions with his family. He recalls holding a kerosene lamp at night so his grandfather could see the fish.

"You had to be careful because the fish would jump in the boat when they saw that light," he said. "It was so dark back then. There were no lights from homes and streets, and when you held the light up it scared the fish and they'd jump right in the boat."

Roy Jr. said he has no desire to leave the area where his family has lived for five generations. And he enjoys living a lifestyle as close to theirs as he can while still keeping some of the modern comforts of home.

"My little world here hasn't changed much," he said. "This is all I know. I was born and raised here."

Roy Jr. has tried to keep his family history alive by telling his stories to his six children. He said the Johnsons are proud of their deep Bonita Springs roots.

"I'm very proud to say nobody can look at me and say I don't belong here," he said.

— This concludes our summer series profiling the First Families of Bonita Springs and Estero. During the summer we featured 10 pioneer families who still have many descendants living in the area. Families included the Reahards, Fernandezes, Weekses, Hogues, Hornes, Lileses, Morrows, McKeownes, Pipers and Johnsons.

PROFILES

■ **NAME:** Roy Johnson Jr.

■ **AGE:** 42

■ **FAMILY:** Great-great-grandparents Molly and Frank Johnson, great-grandparents Hub and Mary Johnson, grandparents Elmer and



Lenore Johnson, parents Roy Sr. and Delores Johnson, five brothers and sisters, six children of his own.

■ **ROOTS:** Born at Lee Memorial Hospital, brought to Bonita Springs when 3 days old. Raised on Coconut Road in northern Bonita.

■ **NAME:** Mildred Turner

■ **AGE:** 66

■ **FAMILY:** was married to Bobby Johnson, who was



the son of Elmer Johnson, grandson of Hub Johnson, great-grandson of Molly and Frank Johnson. Four children, three grandchildren.

■ **ROOTS:** Southwest Florida native who married into one of the area's first families.