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Chasing Shadows: Gibson Road family rooted In agriculture



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This is Thomas C. Gibson working on some of his 5000+ chrysanthemums in Knoxville, Tennessee.



Posted Thursday, January 28, 2021 11:26 am

by Pam Richardson Guest Columnist, The Apalachicola Times

Our local farmers markets and residents would jump for joy if it were possible to bring Apalachicola plantsman Thomas Cameron Gibson back among us. We are accustomed to thinking that the forward march of time brings progress, but in some cases people were better off in the past, and this is certainly true in regard to the availability of locally cultivated produce in the Apalachicola area.

Thomas was born in 1857 in Long Cane (near LaGrange), Georgia, one of nine children of Osbourn and Amarintha (“Minnie”) Gibson. A decade later, the Gibson family were living in the north Alabama boomtown of Bluffton where Osbourn worked first as wholesale grocer and then as a farmer. Something, however, led them to move again, this time to Apalachicola where, after Osbourn’s death in 1884, Thomas followed in his father’s footsteps and established himself as a farmer – and an extraordinary one at that.

By 1890, Thomas owned a home on the corner of Chestnut Street (Avenue E) and Maple (15th) Street, and was married to a Georgia woman named May Hutchison. Their only child, Maysie Gibson, was born in 1891. May taught first grade, presumably at the Chapman School, and Thomas worked tirelessly on his large farm. His mother, Minnie, died in 1893 and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery.

A 1909 issue of the “North South” periodical described Thomas as “one of the most reliable and intelligent farmers in Franklin County with 25 years’ experience here.” He owned 25 acres, 13 of which he cultivated, on what is now Gibson Road in northwest Apalachicola. His farmland lay on one side of the road and his dairy, consisting of 43 head of Jersey cows, lay on the other.

According to the article, “the milk supplies Apalachicola. Whatever surplus there is is made into butter. An up-to-date barn and appliances, with everything clean and the animals in fine condition, speak for the care exercised in the dairy. The farm supplies the cattle feed. Corn and sorghum are mixed into silage, producing 20 tons to the acre.”

Census information suggests that by 1910 Thomas and his family were living on Gibson Road. It also shows his wife May had stopped working as a schoolteacher, most likely because she was needed to help with operating the farm and dairy.

Thomas planted three crops a year, one of corn, one of field peas for making hay, and one of vegetables which included cabbage, onions, beets, celery, sweet and Irish potatoes, melons, tomatoes, and “the finest of lettuce, which is a future big money-maker for Franklin County gardeners,” according to the North-South article.

In 1908, Thomas broke all records in this part of the country with a yield of 130,000 pounds of cabbage from a two-acre patch. He was most proud of one of his cabbages which, pulled straight out of the ground, weighed 60 pounds and measured four feet across! He was also producing 200 bushels to the acre of potatoes, about double the national average at that time.

On a more limited scale, he also grew grapes, pears, strawberries and persimmons. The secret to making the dark sand of this region produce such bounty, Thomas said, was stable fertilizer - of which his cows kept him in abundant supply. His customers were all local and included the Franklin Inn, predecessor to today's Gibson Inn. (Genealogical research shows no relation between Thomas Gibson and the two Gibson sisters who bought the inn in 1923.)

The North-South article stated, not surprisingly, that "the operation of both dairy and farm is proving too much for Mr. Gibson...and he would like to arrange with one or two live, industrious farmers who understand the business to join him and grow vegetables on shares." That dream, however, did not come to fruition, and in 1912, Thomas sold his land which had grown to 40 acres, 55 head of cattle, two mules, one horse, four wagons and various farm equipment and supplies to Rufus M. Yent and Rufus Tucker.

Thomas and May's daughter Maysie was by this time 20 years old, "a young woman of charming personality with a wide circle of friends" (Apalachicola Times, Nov. 18, 1916). Modeling herself after her mother, Maysie decided to become a schoolteacher and went to Gainesville one summer to earn some credits towards certification.

There, she met and fell in love with a Russian man, Constantine Dmitriev Sherbakoff, 13 years her senior. Coincidentally, he was, like her father, an inveterate plantsman, only his specialty was plant diseases. And, unlike Thomas Gibson who was self-taught, Sherbakoff had been educated at some prestigious institutions.

Constantine Sherbakoff was the son of Dmitri Sherbakoff and Anna Alexandrovna Stolarova from the province of Ekaterinoslav, now a part of the Ukraine. He studied at the Agricultural School in Kherson, Russia from 1895 to 1900 and at the School of Forestry in St. Petersburg from 1901 to 1907.

His schooling was interrupted by the violent upheavals in Russia in 1905-6. Today, his 90-year-old daughter-in-law recalls his telling her about being hit on the head with a saber by a Russian soldier on horseback, then passing out, and waking up in prison.

Upon his release, he decided to permanently leave his homeland. He got himself to Glasgow, Scotland where he boarded a ship to New York, arriving in June 1907. With a friend, he went to Ithaca, New York and worked on a farm for a few years before entering Cornell University from which he earned a bachelor of science in agriculture and a PhD in plant pathology. Armed with these degrees, he secured a position as associate plant pathologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, which is where he met Maysie Gibson.

They married at the Methodist Church in Apalachicola on the morning of Nov. 11, 1916 in front of a large crowd of family and friends, then left on the Crescent City ferry to Carrabelle for their honeymoon on Florida's east coast. Being a close knit family, Maysie's parents decided to leave Apalachicola and join the newlyweds in Gainesville.

In 1919, Constantine became a US citizen. His naturalization papers describe him as five-foot, six-inches, 142 pounds, with brown hair and brown eyes. On the application form, he had to renounce all allegiance to any foreign ruler, particularly "Nicholas II, Emperor of all the Russias." Tragically, after leaving Russia, Constantine never again heard from his parents, or his sister, Catherine, all three of whom he believed had been murdered.

In 1920, when Constantine accepted a job as plant pathologist at the University of Tennessee Agricultural Station in Knoxville, he, his wife, and his in-laws moved there together. Constantine held that job for over 30 years and published 50 papers about various pathogens affecting agricultural crops. Constantine's love of plants was matched only by Thomas's.

Even though Thomas was nearing 70 when they went to Knoxville, he established both an enormous garden and a successful wholesale florist business. His specialty was chrysanthemums and he devised a way to force them into bloom six weeks earlier than usual. Never one to do anything halfway, Thomas often spent as much as 12 hours a day tending to his 5,000-plus chrysanthemums. Constantine, too, was a dedicated gardener, and one can only imagine the long hours the two men must have spent in conversation, huddled together in their greenhouse or over flower beds.

Maysie also loved flowers, but her time was devoted to other things. In 1927, she gave birth to her only child, Paul. She was a member of many organizations including the Methodist Church, the League of American Pen Women, and the Faculty Women's Club. Both she and Constantine were avid and excellent bridge players. She also wrote poetry which culminated, in 1959, with the publication of a book of her poems entitled "Look on This Land: Panoramic Florida in Song," a paean to her home state.

Apalachicola River by May Gibson Sherbakoff

Tell of the Apalachicola, known

To daring men of long-forgotten time.

Narvaez built crude ships from timbers grown

Upon her shores. Pen in well-measured rhyme

His failure to accomplish his high dream

Of reaching Mexico. Then let some bard

Relate the epic of this tawny stream
That timelessly the age-old forests guard.
Upon these banks, ti-ti and sweet bay scent
Fill all the star-enchanted nights of spring.
While flowing on in languorous content,
The river, quietly busy with remembering,
Hears echoes of the old stern-wheeler's song,
Ghostly, nostalgic, as it moves along.

Thomas Cameron Gibson, Apalachicola farmer and Knoxville horticulturist, died in 1940, at age 83. His wife May died in 1952, at age 84, daughter Maysie died in 1962, at age 71, and his son-in-law Constantine died in 1965, at age 87. Paul Sherbakoff became a well-respected hotelier in the Knoxville area where he died in 2012, at age 85, and where his wife and children still live.

Thomas C. Gibson was not the only productive farmer in his time in Franklin County; there were others who raised brown leghorn chickens, cattle and hogs, pecans, pomegranates, collards, and turnips. And Constantine, featured in "Who Was Who in America (1961-68)," was not the only brilliant American plant pathologist in the mid-20th century.

However, in their chosen fields, the two men far outshone many of their colleagues and deserve to be remembered for their superior contributions to their communities.

This article originally appeared on The Apalachicola Times: Chasing Shadows: Gibson Road family rooted In agriculture (<https://www.apalachiatimes.com/story/news/2021/01/28/chasing-shadows-gibson-road-family-rooted-agriculture/4276327001/>)

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