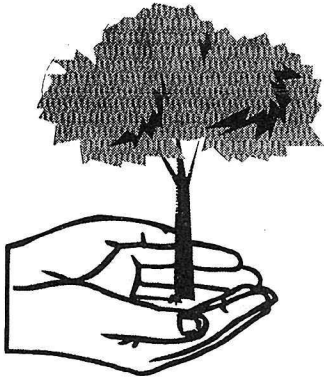


THEODORE ROOSEVELT AREA

TIMUCUAN ECOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC PRESERVE

The Gift



For well over six thousand years humans have lived in the area now known as northeast Florida. Beginning with Native Americans each succeeding culture has left its mark upon the land. As human populations enlarge and flourish so have the repercussions of our impacts upon our natural resources.

In the past one hundred years human interaction has reshaped the St. Johns River, nearly leveling the maritime hammock forests that once shaded *its* banks, bulkheaded *its* shorelines and dredged *its* salt marshes. This process continues at such a rapid rate that residents of little more than a decade barely recognize the areas around their homes. Human interaction with the St. Johns River and its attendant uplands are not only a legacy of the past but a reflection of the present.

Part of the saga of northeast Florida's development has been marked by human greed intent on taking whatever the land offered and leaving nothing in return. Fortunately, greed has not totally dominated all human interaction. Some men and women have found Florida beautiful, called it a paradise, and treated it as such. Their love and respect are responsible for preserving what remains today of "Old Florida."

One such person was William Henry Browne III. The land upon which he lived his entire life is today known as the Theodore Roosevelt Area; a unit of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve.

In 1882 real estate attorney William Henry Browne II and wife Eliza moved to Jacksonville, Florida from New York City. Shortly thereafter their two daughters, aged 1 and 5, died in a yellow fever epidemic that killed many people in northeast Florida. Following this tragedy Mrs. Browne bore another child they named William Henry Browne III.

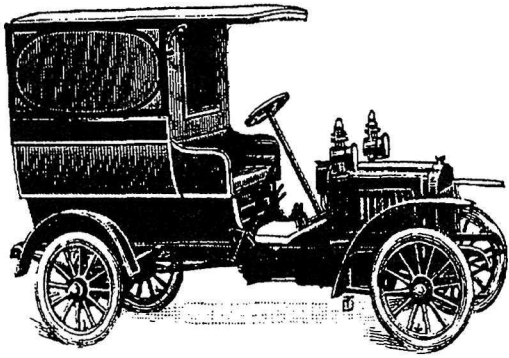
In an effort to safeguard the child from the then unknown cause of yellow fever the Brownes purchased a 600 acre tract of land far from the more populated areas of Jacksonville. In 1890, when son William III was six months old, the family moved into an existing two-story home that overlooked a beautiful circular shaped saltmarsh. The following year another son, Saxon, was born.

In this rural maritime setting the Browne boys flourished. Their mother, a trained school teacher, taught the boys to read, write, and do basic mathematics. When not under their mother's tutelage the boys fished, roamed the vast shell mounds, and explored the ruins of old Confederate gun batteries on St. Johns Bluff. They also tended the family's cattle, chickens, citrus trees, and vegetable garden.

Today Browne's former land, the Theodore Roosevelt Area, is surrounded by urban development but 100 years ago the property was isolated. At that time the city limits of Jacksonville did not reach this far into eastern Duval County. The nearest towns were Mayport (2 miles east), Fulton (1 mile west), and Cosmo (2 miles west). Transportation to and from Jacksonville was available by catching a river ferry, named the *Hessie*, which made a daily round-trip from Fulton.

Nearby was the Jacksonville, Mayport, and Pablo Railway which connected Arlington to Mayport and what is now Atlantic Beach. It was also known as the "Jump Man and Push" railroad for it's tendency to break down or get stuck when shifting sands covered the rails. Bordering the Browne's property to the west was the abandoned promontory of St. Johns Bluff, ninety feet high, from which young "Willie" could see the Atlantic Ocean five miles to the east.





In the early 1900's a fire destroyed the Browne's two-story home *Shell Mount*. Mr. and Mrs. Browne moved back to Jacksonville while Willie and Saxon stayed on the property. The boys lived in the barn until they were able to cut enough lumber to build the one-room cabin where they would live the rest of their lives. On his sixteenth birthday Willie was given ownership of the property as a gift from his father. Mr. Browne instructed Willie to nurture and care for the property, "keep hunters off it," and to maintain the land in a natural state. The gift of the property to Willie at such a young age instilled the responsibility and value of wildlife conservation. These values became a major part of his personality and lifestyle.

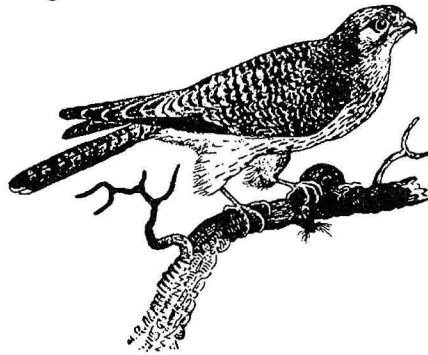
Willie and Saxon made their living by farming, commercial fishing, running a saw mill, and selling oystershells taken from the extensive mounds that still dominate the property. They also worked a variety of odd jobs such as landscaping, woodcarving, and boat building.

In the 1920's, both Mr. and Mrs. Browne died and were buried on the property. From their parents, Willie and Saxon inherited an intense appreciation for the land that led to a lifelong desire to protect the natural bounty they both depended upon for their daily existence.

In later years, Willie and Saxon owned a Model-T car of which Saxon did all the driving. After Saxon died in 1953, sixty-four year old Willie, who did not know how to drive, began to rely more and more on his friends to help him get around and run errands.

Following Saxon's death Willie lived a reclusive, isolated existence seldom leaving his property. Neither electricity nor indoor plumbing were ever installed into his cabin. Water was hand-pumped each day from a well, located close to the cabin, and carried indoors in a metal bucket. A single lightbulb and a radio were powered by a battery from the Model-T. This style of low-technology dependence seemed to be all Willie needed or desired.

Although Willie shunned civilization, he demonstrated his love for people by giving away parcels of land to people in need and to those who would value the land's natural beauty. In 1960 Willie gave seven acres of land along Mt. Pleasant Road to the Campfire Girls organization for a place to build a campground and lodge.



During the last years of his life Willie struggled to keep his property. To pay taxes and medical bills he sold small parcels of land as well as dump-truck loads of sand. Though real estate developers eagerly offered him millions of dollars for his property, Willie refused to sell. "Money cannot buy happiness and this place makes me happy," Willie once said.

Willie worried that there would come a time when Jacksonville would be so densely populated and developed that no wild areas would remain where people could enjoy the natural beauty of "Old Florida." In 1969 Willie Browne donated all his land to The Nature Conservancy with the stipulation that it or any future owner would keep the land in its natural state.

Willie requested that the property be named for his hero, former president Theodore Roosevelt. Willie liked Roosevelt because he was the first president to make conservation a national policy and goal. In 1990 The Nature Conservancy sold the Theodore Roosevelt Area to the National Park Service which added it to the Timucuan Preserve.

In December, 1970, Willie Browne died alone in his cabin content that he had done everything possible to nurture, conserve, and protect the gift of land bequeathed to him by his father. With his passing, Willie bequeathed his conservation values and his precious gift to all of us, for all time.

Under the trees of the Theodore Roosevelt Area, in the land that he cherished, Willie and his family are buried. It is only fitting that they should remain here where they lived for so many years. Even more appropriate is the fact that this area, as part of the Timucuan Preserve, is being preserved for the enrichment and enjoyment of present and future generations.



Willie Browne, 1969

The foundations of Willie's cabin and the two-story house still exist on the shell mound overlooking Round Marsh, and can be reached via the Willie Browne Trail, at the Theodore Roosevelt Area, Timucuan Preserve.