

# THE AUCILLA RIVERMEN



Fishermen with a haul of channel bass (redfish) from the lower Aucilla River in 1914. (Photo courtesy of William Wright)

By: John E. Ladson III and George M. Cole  
 Courtesy of the Aucilla Research Institute



Aaron Brown

**AARON BROWN**  
 While the Aucilla River and nearby streams produced a number of interesting outdoorsman, circa 1890 to 1940, perhaps the most widely known was Aaron Brown (1898-1984).

Aaron's father, Asa, (a.k.a. "Ace") migrated to Florida from West Georgia around 1879, according to an interview with Aaron published in the *Magnolia Monthly* in 1974.

According to the article, Asa first settled along the Econfina River and later married Margaret Stanley. However, Aaron's sister, Collie, passed on a richer version to her son, Richard Williams, which he relates in *Wacissa Riverman* by Annie L. Giles.

Richard states that his grandfather, Ace Brown, had Creek Indian blood and was probably from Alabama. He further says that for reasons unknown Ace walked into church one day in Macon, Georgia and killed his uncle.

As a fugitive, he found his way to one of the wildest and most isolated areas in Old Middle Florida. Maybe living first on the Econfina, he met and married Margaret, then moved their homestead to the bank of the Pinhook River.

The Pinhook River (pictured below), a small obscure and extremely beautiful stream, lies in close proximity to the

mouth of the Aucilla and flows into Apalachee Bay.

Richard's account places the Ace Brown family on the Pinhook living in a small home with a roof of thatched palmetto fronds. Thus the reader is given a choice of which story to adopt in following Aaron's early family history.

Without question, he was raised on Apalachee Bay and in the flatlands and swamps adjoining the Aucilla, Pinhook and Econfina Rivers. It is also evident his parents moved him and his siblings about the territory and periodically down to South Florida, where they farmed vegetable crops in season.

Aaron recalled seeing Haley's Comet in 1910 during one of the South Florida trips. By age 14 he considered himself a commercial fisherman, and as he advanced into adulthood he also became a market hunter selling venison and other wild game. Like his father, Aaron seasonally traveled to South Florida to farm.

In appearance, he stood

about 5'8" in height with medium build, brown hair and blue eyes. He was personable, well liked and a gifted storyteller who could play a guitar.

Somehow in his childhood, Aaron gained a little education through the third grade. Although he lived in a thinly-populated area with highly-limited accessibility, Aaron had a social life -- as illustrated by one of his favorite stories about the "Wacissa Frolic."

As a young man, his portal to the outside world for trade and supplies lay up the Slave Canal connecting the Aucilla and Wacissa Rivers.

Consequently, he would pole his wooden skiff up the Aucilla into the canal and on to the head of the Wacissa, where there was a fish house and store.

Along the way he would stop to visit with friends and offer to bring back essential items as needed. Sometimes his kindness was repaid by a jug of moonshine.

On one of these trips, he heard some gossip at the Wacissa store about a "frolic" planned at the Storey home not far away. Looking for a little fun, Aaron traveled to the house to join the Storey children while they partied during the absence of their parents, who were on a trip to visit Georgia relatives.

Somebody supplied the music, and the parent's scuppernong wine livened up the event. Aaron was given a key to the smokehouse containing a barrel of the wine and was delegated the task of keeping a bucket full on the back porch, where everyone drank liberally from the same dipper.

Aaron said he danced until the girls had to put him to bed. After several days of this non-stop merriment, the sunlight reached his bleary eyes one morning, and he knew it was time to leave because no one wanted to be around when the parents came home!

In 1928, Aaron married Mary Lee Strickland

from a clan with a long history along the Aucilla. Residing mostly in the vicinity of St. Marks, their union produced four girls and a boy.

Aaron commercially fished in the Aucilla, Econfina, Pinhook, St. Marks and Wakulla rivers while occasionally working on barges in the Gulf and farming as mentioned above.

Particularly in the days before mobile radios and cell phones, a commercial fisherman could get into serious trouble due to weather or accidents. Aaron survived close calls with five hurricanes, but nearly died from a totally unexpected incident.

Having a fondness for figs, he would often pick some from an old tree near Mandalay and store them in a recycled cooking oil can to accompany him onto the Gulf flats.

On one of his trips to net mullet he piloted his boat to the waters near Rock Island, where there was a crude shelter encampment. Mullet were often netted at night, given their inclination to jump when a powerful light was cast upon the water's surface, thereby making it easier to locate the schools.

At some point, Aaron took a break and consumed some of the figs. Shortly thereafter he became violently ill with severe pain in his stomach. Almost debilitated, he barely managed to reach the Rock Island shelter, where he crawled onto a makeshift bed.

Alone in the dark and convinced he was about to die, he heard a boat in the distance. Draden Padgett, Sr. was fishing that night as well and recognized Aaron's boat at the island.

Soon Draden found him and realized he must have somehow been poisoned. Forcing his fingers down into Aaron's throat, he induced vomiting, which saved his life. It is not known how the figs became contaminated.

Maybe the tree had been "dusted" with an insecticide by someone

without Aaron's knowledge or perhaps he picked up the wrong storage can which had previously held some poisonous substance.

Trouble could come in other ways as well. Rivermen like Aaron came along in an era free of game and fish laws and other limiting regulations. They took whatever they needed to support their way of life and never saw significant population declines.

As human pressure on the resource mounted and degradation of the environment progressed, the need for more stringent regulation and conservation became apparent. The transition was a stretch for men like Aaron, and while some made the leap to compliance, others fell short.

There were gray areas as well in some of the early code sections. It can be fairly said that for quite a long period game wardens were not warmly received at Nutall Rise and vicinity.

According to a newspaper article in the *Tallahassee Democrat*, Joseph A. Brown and H. H. Strickland were arrested one cold day in February 1947 for illegal net fishing in the mouth of the Aucilla River. An altercation ensued, and Strickland received a gunshot wound in his leg.

He survived, a Taylor County jury acquitted the accused and they subsequently filed legal action for assault against the two arresting wardens. The case was heard in Jefferson County, where the charges were dismissed so all the participants in that debacle walked, or in Strickland's case, maybe

limped away.

Aaron would roam the local woods and waters well into the future. In 1953 he witnessed a plane crash on the flats near St. Marks. He and a Coast Guard officer were the first to reach the tragic scene, and he assisted in the recovery of the deceased pilot and his wife.

Most of his outdoor adventures were more positive, and his name appears occasionally in the 1950's sporting section of the *Tallahassee Democrat* mentioning large catches of speckled trout and redfish.

After his wife, Mary, passed away in 1981, Aaron spent his final days with his son Joe, who lived on the Aucilla River near Mandalay.

His passing in 1984 marked the loss of one of the region's most engaging and knowledgeable rivermen.

(To be continued)

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## LEGALS

(Continued from page 10)

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