

# LIFE IN THE ST. SIMONS ISLAND

## Native Islanders Have Originated a Pe- ds Expression in Throbbing Folk Songs

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There are queer dances of sexual suggestion, and weird harmonies which orchestras and composers have been unable to reproduce.

In this article is related the fantastic history of these people, their cherished and beautiful legends, their noble and royal ancestries, and the ghostly romances that fill their pulsing island life.



Maggie MacIntosh and "Old Quarterman" rest during an intermission in the ring shout staged in the daytime. That the old fellow still has young ideas is amply shown by the picture; he has, however, passed the three-score and ten mark long since, although he does not know exactly what his age is.



One of the native "quarters," a tabby shack which was originally part of the Retreat Plantation which is still standing and is occupied by Floyd White and his family. Floyd has lived his whole life on the island. The "quarters" was built, as nearly as can be determined, in about 1783, and was one of the older buildings of the plantation when it was abandoned after the War of '61; other buildings of the plantation were partially or wholly demolished by the war.

Note, that hanging in the doorway next to the woman and children, there is the skinned carcass of a rabbit drying in the sun — one example of the many primitive methods which are still extant on the island.

no paired dancing. Yet there is a sexual suggestion in most of the movements both by the men and the women, although their bodies never touch. Each performer is "on his own."

There is a large variety of "steps," not only with the feet, but also with the entire body, the head and the hands. The shoulders are held stiff and the feet close to the floor, and the most intricate and fantastic patterns are woven and repeated. Here again the ring shout of Georgia corresponds to the dances of Haiti and of one or two other places in the United States, chiefly Florida.

The Georgia Islanders derive a rare exhilaration and abandon in their ring shout; its significance and its great antiquity thrill the imagination. W. B. Seabrook in his vivid book on Haiti ("The Magic Island") covers this angle of ancient worship, and traces the origin of many of the actions directly to African tribal rites, a number of which find vivid expression in the ring shout.

### The Native Islanders are Zealous in their Own Way

Not all of the native islanders' time is spent singing and dancing. They are busy and industrious and thrifty. Most of them own their own homes and usually a plot of ground; some of the most beautiful flower gardens in the country are about the homes of some of the colored islanders.

The almost forgotten art of "tabby" building is being revived. Composed of crushed oyster shell, whole shell and sand and bound together with



Mary Covington (shown here) is one of the best singers in the neighborhood and remembers many of the old songs she heard as a child, and which are now being revived.

burned shell lime this building material is peculiarly harmonious for homes and clubs. Bob Merchant who was almost ninety-four when he died, was one of the chief sources of information on this, as well as on old songs and customs.

Bob liked to recall the old days and tales. He told of Neptune Small (whose son verified the story). Neptune was the valet of Captain Lord King, one of the wealthy planters of Saint Simons Island in the days of '61. Neptune, of course, followed the captain to the war. At Chancellorsville, Virginia, the captain was killed.

Weeks later Neptune appeared at Saint Simons with the body of the captain. "Captain wanted to lie with his folks in Christ Church burying ground," was his whole explanation!

Imagination balks at trying to picture the labors of the young colored man bearing the body of the loved captain over those weary hundreds of miles.

### The Only Licensed Woman Navigator Tells Interesting Story

Captain Georgia Smith (or Skipper Georgia) is the only licensed woman navigator in the state. She wears men's clothing and remembers the days when boats were just about the only means of transportation. Captain Georgia's efforts to trace her ancestry unearthed another interesting legend.

One of the slave ships in the early days arrived at an African port for its load of "merchandise." Much to

the chagrin of the Arabians who were to supply the human freight, they had to admit that they had failed. The ship captain, though, in apparent forgiveness invited the Arab traders aboard to the usual banquet. The Arabians banqueted not wisely, but too well. When they awoke, it was to find themselves in the hold usually filled with slaves, chained and the ship under way. Later they were sold as they had sold so many others.

There is today a definite trace of Mohammedan influence on The Islands. On one of the islands lives Bilali, whose very name is strangely like Bu-Allah. His appearance, as Captain Georgia's, is neither Caucasian, Indian nor African. More convincing proof of the tale, though, is in the slave diary written entirely in Arabic and which is said to be the only diary ever kept by a slave. It has never been translated, except a few passages, and its very existence is known only to a few.

Royal ancestry, too, is in some of the blood. Maggie MacIntosh, one of the best "shouters" is descended from an African prince. Prince Dembo as a young man was sold by his father, the king of one tribe, to the traders. What dreadful circumstance moved the father to this act is not even guessed at. But for certain considerations, among which was a gun the son was sold and brought to America. The blood of leadership flows in the veins of his descendant still, and makes her one of the leaders in community affairs as well as one of the leading dancers.

### The Native Islanders' Love Is True and Everlasting

Ghost stories and yarns of spirits abound; often these stories have a fascinating and romantic twist. For instance the tale of Mary Wan, and the Mary Wan Road. One of the oldest roads on Saint Simons Island winds vaguely beneath great pine trees and stately oaks. Each oak has its trailing beard of gray moss "like druids of old." Here, under these old trees, Mary and her beloved walked with arms entwined about each other's waists as they talked of love and made their plans for the future.

Mary, so the story tells, was of unusual beauty—one of the belles of The Islands. But, unlike so many

popular girls, she refused to find herself another lover when death claimed the one and only. Each day at sunset, after he died, she strolled down the path they had loved while he lived. Even when old age finally claimed Mary in death, she continued to stroll along the same road at dusk. And today, eyes of faithful lovers of this generation are said to be able to see Mary Wan's spirit on the road in the soft light of a young moon at nightfall, as she strolls along the love-hallowed path.

Such is the mellow romance of the background of the people on Georgia's Golden Isles. Up and down and now up again, the peniculum of their fortunes swings.

Life on these islands is sweet, and always brightly colored. (A fiction writer, for instance, has renamed Saint Simons Island the Cardinals' Island because of the great number of these vivid birds which live there year 'round.) It is never extremely cold—last winter a thin film of ice appeared on sweet water only three mornings during the season. There is always a good market for vegetables and almost always work to be found; during the summer vacation months while the great swarms of tourists are present, there is good money to be made from the many services they demand. Many of the Negro natives have their own cars which is something new for country folk.

It is possible, too, to make a profitable living in the fishing trade. Shrimp fishing is one of the big industries. Pan fish always bring a good price, and a man who is handy with a throw net can get himself all the bait he needs to catch a nice string of fish. But best of all, the Negroes who have lived all their lives on The Islands are naturally the best guides. They are well paid to guide fishing parties in the summer and hunting parties in the winter.

Great turpentine camps are scattered among the islands, too. This is one of the few old industries which still exists along the coast.

It is an unusual native life on The Islands; enough work; play; schools for the children; enough churches; enough sunshine—but best of all none of the feverish rush of the city. There's time to sing, and old old heart-songs to sing.

THE END