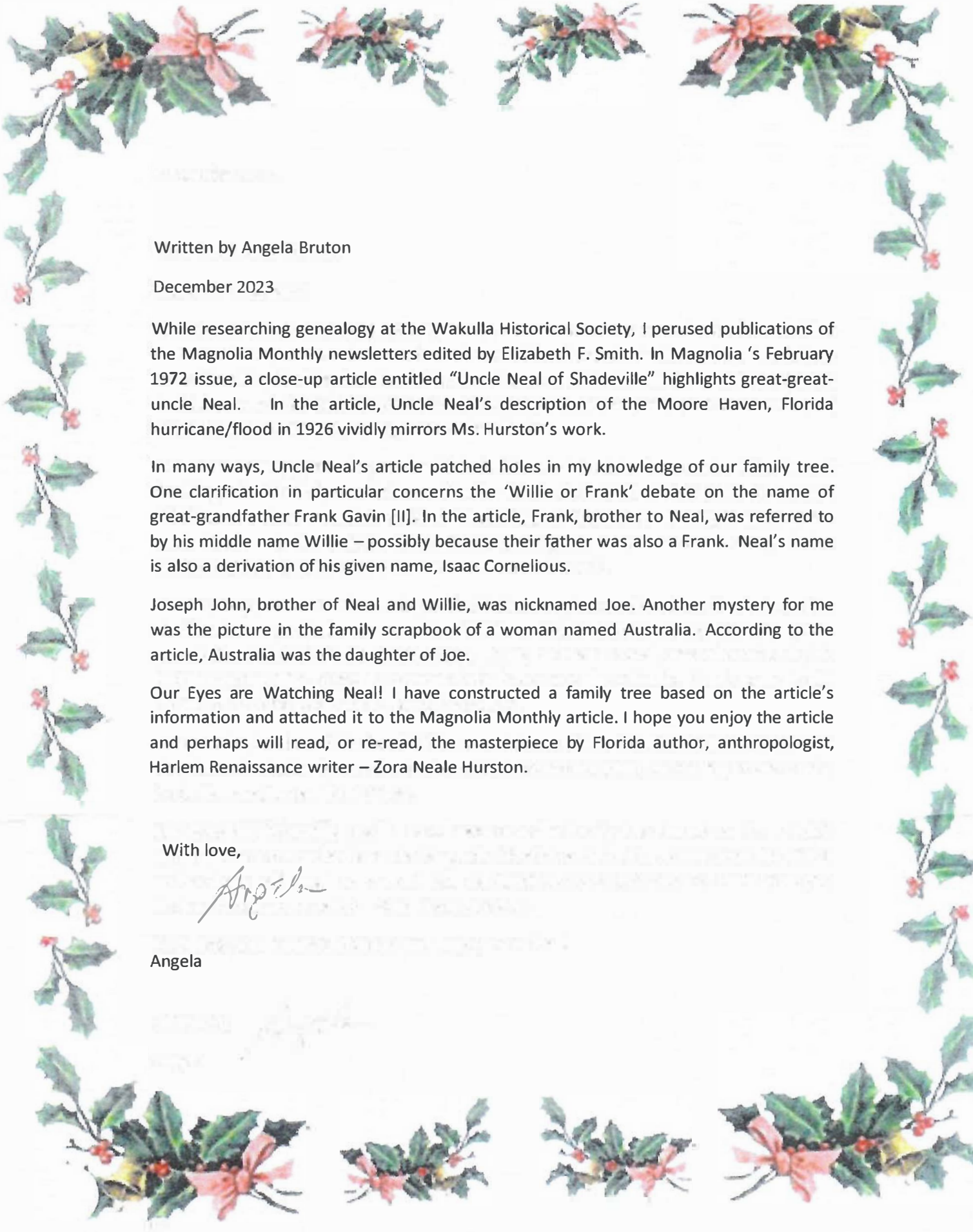




Written by Angela Bruton

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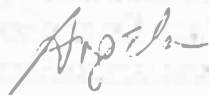
While researching genealogy at the Wakulla Historical Society, I perused publications of the Magnolia Monthly newsletters edited by Elizabeth F. Smith. In Magnolia 's February 1972 issue, a close-up article entitled "Uncle Neal of Shadeville" highlights great-great-uncle Neal. In the article, Uncle Neal's description of the Moore Haven, Florida hurricane/flood in 1926 vividly mirrors Ms. Hurston's work.

In many ways, Uncle Neal's article patched holes in my knowledge of our family tree. One clarification in particular concerns the 'Willie or Frank' debate on the name of great-grandfather Frank Gavin [II]. In the article, Frank, brother to Neal, was referred to by his middle name Willie – possibly because their father was also a Frank. Neal's name is also a derivation of his given name, Isaac Cornelious.

Joseph John, brother of Neal and Willie, was nicknamed Joe. Another mystery for me was the picture in the family scrapbook of a woman named Australia. According to the article, Australia was the daughter of Joe.

Our Eyes are Watching Neal! I have constructed a family tree based on the article's information and attached it to the Magnolia Monthly article. I hope you enjoy the article and perhaps will read, or re-read, the masterpiece by Florida author, anthropologist, Harlem Renaissance writer – Zora Neale Hurston.

With love,



Angela

Close-Up

NEAL GAVIN OF SHADEVILLE

Neal Gavin was born in Shadeville in 1882 about 300 feet away from the trailer in which he lives now with a niece, but though he turned 90 during January, he was still keeping store at the age of 88 when he finally decided it was time to retire. His niece, a retired psychiatric ward worker and former school-teacher, looks 25 years younger than she is, and so does Neal, who like many Negroes (and whites) in Wakulla County, had a hoe in his hand before he was knee-high to a duck.

At the time of Neal's birth, Shadeville was known as Shady Grove, but the name was changed to Shadeville when his father started a store there in the latter 1890's. Both names refer to the large, live oak trees still standing in the community four miles north of Crawfordville on Hy. 319.



Neal's parents were both slaves. His father belonged to Abram Gavin, a Wakulla County antebellum planter whose original home is still located several miles east of Crawfordville. Abram left no children, but there are many colored Gavins named for him. Neal's mother, Susan Thomas, belonged to Wesley Adams, a planter who came from Jefferson to Wakulla County in the 1840's and had a plantation first at Sopchoppy, then came up to Crawfordville after the Civil War and bought the Gavin place which is now referred to as the old Adams place. The house has been remodeled that both planters lived in, but still has the original log beams beneath the floor.

Neal recalls that a man had to prove his intentions of marrying a girl by jumping over a broom that she put down on the floor in front of him.

Neal's father, Frank, bought his store from a white man named Frank Duval who owned a lot of property in Wakulla County. Before that he was a farmer and a carpenter. He ran the store for 18 or 20 years when shortly before World War I he sold it to his sons, Joe and Willie Gavin, who ran it until Willie sold out his part to Joe. Frank died in 1925 but while he was still alive he lived with his wife and children in two rooms attached to the store. The store has been rebuilt once, for one of Neal's brothers, named George, had a fight with a man named Sam Randolph, and the latter set the original store on fire and burned it down, or so it "proved out" in court, says Neal. The store was rebuilt on the same spot, a frame building with a shingled roof.

After the Gavin children married and their mother had a stroke, they would cook all the food and bring it to the house/store for their parents to eat. Neal had two brothers and two sisters, Willie, Joe, Emma, and Ella, and they farmed 45 acres that had belonged to their father. Neal, however, bought another 45 acres from Wesley Adams in 1892 for \$3.50 an acre. Some of the things he owned on his farm was a plow, buggy, horses (but no mules), hogs, chickens, and guinea chickens. He also grew a lot of peaches which he took down to St. Marks and sold for \$1 a bushel, "but we can't raise 'em like we used to". The Gavins took their seed cotton up to Tallahassee by horse and wagon, leaving late at night and camping near Munson Slough, then having it ginned at a place near the railroad depot. After the gin separated the seed from the cotton, they sold the latter to several brothers named Levi. The seed they brought back home, some to sell and the rest to plant. The Gavins also bought flour, rice, and sugar and a real treat was to have white flour biscuits and lemonade about once a week.

For Christmas Neal hung up his stocking and the next morning would

NEAL GAVIN OF SHADEVILLE

find an orange and a pack of firecrackers in it. "Nowadays," he observed, "children get so much all year around, there's nuthin' left to want for Christmas."

Neal attended school at Shadeville, Bethel, and St. Paul. The term was three months long, but since they were often staggered, he sometimes got to 2 or 3 schools in one year. His teachers included J. W. Jones, James Hargrett, Robert Allen, Bonnie Thompson, and Philman Gavin.

Neal ran errands down to Crawfordville for his parents by riding horseback when he was only 7 or 8 years old. One time he got turned around. He knew he was lost, but not knowing which way to go, he kept riding until he wound up in Sopchoppy. He stopped to ask a lady how to get back to Shadeville and she said, "Just turn your horse around and let him find your way home." The horse did, indeed, and when he arrived in Shadeville late at night, everyone in the community was out hunting for Neal.

"That's the way it was when he used to drive up to Tallahassee," Neal recalls. "We used to sleep sitting up on the wagon seat, but the horses kept plodding on and they always got us there."

Neal married Mamie Lewis whom he met at the church in Bethel (it is still there). The minister was Rev. J. O. Kelly, minister of the New Bridge Hope Church in Shadeville.

On New Year's Day, 1920, Neal went by train down to south Florida where he heard work was more plentiful than it was at home. He changed trains at Jacksonville and again at Haines City. He went to Moore Haven on the west shore of Lake Okeechobee where he worked for a truck farmer named McBride who raised cabbage, string beans, Irish potatoes, tomatoes, and egg plant. After he started he sent for his wife and four children. After three years of working for McBride he rented 40 acres of his own. Though Neal didn't say why, after three years of renting farm land, he went to Sarasota to work and came back to visit his family on week-ends. Thus he was in Sarasota in 1926 when the greatest natural disaster that ever befell Florida occurred in Moore Haven. After two very dry years in 1924 and 1925, the next year a hurricane blew in off the Atlantic and literally swept the water out of the shallow basin of Lake Okeechobee and drowned out the town of Moore Haven with a loss of over 300 lives. So many people were killed that trenches were dug to bury them. Anyone who refused to help dig trenches was put in jail.

The people in Moore Haven had been warned two weeks before it happened that a hurricane might occur, and two women told Neal later they had even seen it in a vision. But they had had such warnings before and nothing had come of it. The year of 1926 had been rainy, and on Labor Day the sheet of water lifted out of the lake dropped directly on the town.

While Neal was frantically trying to find a way down to Moore Haven when word of the disaster came, his wife and children were seeking refuge in the attic of a house. Since the clouds had lowered it was as dark as nighttime, and even after nightfall came (and nobody was sure when it did because of the storm), the water kept rising in the town. The Gavin family huddled in the attic of the house while rain poured, the winds blew, and the water rose. Outside came the cries for help and the shrieks of the dying. Just about the time the water reached the attic, the roof was blown off the house and the whole family had to start swimming. Outside was a scene of utter desolation. People floated by on drifting pieces of debris, some of them impaled on nails of siding and house timbers. Some were already dead and others were begging for help. Whole buildings drifted in the swirling water.



A floating piece of timber hit Garfield Gavin, who was 8, and he went under and never came up again. Mrs. Gavin didn't see Joe because of the darkness. He was 14 years old and eventually he found a floating door which he grabbed, holding onto it by the knob. The door floated by a building, still intact, where Joe's uncle, Andrew Hargrett, was trying to find shelter. Andrew, who was also from Shadeville, recognized the boy and dragged him into the building. Frank, another son, was fortunately visiting in Shadeville at the time, and wasn't in the hurricane.

Their mother, Mamie, ended up on a knoll covered with chickens, snakes, and debris. She was so tired she fell asleep, but not before she saw a nightmare world eddying around here.

When the Red Cross came in they carried people out of the stricken area. Even before her husband arrived, Mamie and her two remaining children were put on a train at Sebring and sent back to Wakulla County and Neal didn't know whether his family was living or dead. They were already gone when he reached Moore Haven and was put to work on burying the bodies.

In spite of the tragedy, Neal stayed in south Florida another 15 years. In 1941 he returned to Shadeville and worked in the Newport shipyard running a crane during World War II. After the war he worked at the Elberta crate mill in Tallahassee, then bought out the store originally run by his father. It was now owned by his brother Joe's daughters, Australia Robertson and Rosa Harris. He ran the store until July, 1970, when at the age of 88 he decided he needed a rest. By then his niece, Mabel Gavin Hargrett, had returned from Chicago with her husband, John, and started running the store so Neal could retire.

Most of the buildings in Shadeville are frame structures and would probably not withstand a hurricane any more than those in Moore Haven. The New Bridge Hope Baptist Church was built in 1918. A previous church stood on the same site and had the same name. It was there when Neal was born in 1882 but he doesn't know when it was built. It also doubled as a school house. No longer standing is the United Band Hall, directly behind the church, where an organization of pallbearers put on entertainments, including old Charlie Chaplin movies. Mabel Gavin remembers one of those, vintage 1922, when Charlie was employed to make doughnuts and he'd wrap the doughnut dough around his arm and then run it down his arm into a vat of boiling grease.

There was also another building called the Good Samaritan Hall where the Masons and other lodges held meetings. This building was on

NEAL GAVIN OF SHADEVILLE

Green Gavin's land. Both buildings have since burned down.

The only time Neal has been out of the state is when he used to take truckloads of peanuts up to Thomasville and Cairo. Neal's first car was a Star which he bought in the 1930's for about \$700. Now he has a small garden in which he uses his plow, gets up early every day to water his chickens and feed them, and is head deacon of his church as well as superintendent of the Sunday School. Only one of Neal's children, Bernice, is still living. He has 12 grandchildren and 21 great-grand-children.

And to go back to an old disaster, Lake Okeechobee now has a dike built all the way around it to prevent another tragedy like that which happened to the Gavin family.

