

MRS. MARY ISABELL WIGGINS MACRAE

Today we are honoring posthumously, Mary Isabell Wiggins MacRae, a true pioneer of Citrus County, our "Woman of the Year", for her relentless love of the Homosassa area and the drive for accurate accounts of history in Citrus County.

Mrs. MacRae was born in Plymouth, England and a graduate of the University of London. She taught school in London before she met James Alexander MacRae. Her father was a noted archeologist who went on many digs to the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Mary Isabell Wiggins and James Alexander MacRae were married on January 6, 1912 in Devonshire, England.

In July, 1914 James MacRae brought his new wife to Connecticut, where she stayed with relatives while he traveled to East Florida to find work. Someone told him about the west coast of Florida and once he saw Homosassa he knew he was home. Homosassa only had sixty-eight residents when they arrived. He returned for her soon after and they began their new life in the United States. In 1916 he bought a general store and together they helped in shipping logs by rail to many cities in the US. In 1921 they established a wholesale fish business, shipping fish to Fulton Fish Markets in New York, Charleston, and Savannah. Along with being a true Citrus County historian, she was running their store, raising their four children, Duncan, Marjorie, Jean and Elizabeth, and found time to be given space at University of Florida to do her research on David L.Yulee.

James MacRae joined the Masonic Lodge in London, and attended meetings in Inverness, Florida. When in London he was Secretary of the London Gaelic Society for many years and was a member of the Presbyterian Church. James passed away in 1953.

Mary MacRae was a very beautiful, gracious lady, who loved the water and the land. When her son Duncan brought his new wife, Wilma, **our guest today**, to live on the property Mary told her new daughter-in-law, "Take as many pictures as possible, because it will change". She loved having people knock on her door and ask questions about the area. She and her husband James loved telling people about their beautiful surroundings on the Homosassa River and loved entertaining for afternoon tea. Wilma and Duncan Jr. felt the same way.

Her organizational ability was recognized by then Governor Leroy Collins, when he appointed her to the original advisory council of the Central Florida Junior College in 1957.

In 1963 Mary organized, and was a member, of the Citrus County Historical Commission and Society.

In January, 1971, at the annual membership of the St. Augustine Historical Society in St. Augustine, Mrs. MacRae received a very prestigious "Award of Merit" from the American Association for State & Local History, for her 50 years of contributions to history, especially in her perseverance to create a Memorial out of the Yulee Sugar Plantation and the writings concerning the history of the Yulee family.

On January 24, 1971 The Tampa Tribune-Times published a page long article on Mary MacRae's manuscript titled "The Story of David Yulee". It was to be published as a book, but after being tied up with lawyers, it never was published. The original manuscript is being held personally by the family and a member of Citrus County Historical Society.

On June 1, 1972, in St. Augustine, Florida, Mary was honored as a member of the National Historical Society, by receiving a famed certificate "For stimulating interest in and preserving the great heritage that is our American History". Wilma, her daughter-in-law, drove Mary, her brother, Philip, and his wife Norah, who were visiting from England, to the prestigious event.

Mary MacRae's driven interest was always of United States Senator, David L. Yulee, of the Civil War period, whose grandfather was Grand Vizier Jacob Ben Youle, the Sultan of Morocco. It was David Yulee who made a speech in the Senate signaling Florida's secession from the Union. As a result, he was convicted of treason and sentenced to prison. He left this area in 1865, after operating a 5000 acre plantation, growing sugar cane and making syrup in the mill.

Mary spent 50 years researching the family, which took her to the Virgin Islands, where she interviewed people in the Jewish colony. Not satisfied with the results of her St. Thomas inquiries, Mary wrote countless letters abroad. She also wrote to a synagogue in Gibraltar. Later, she was given a trunkful of letters and papers owned by Yulee's daughter, Mrs. Florida Neff, which are now in the Florida Historical Library at the University of Florida.

On January 10, 1983 she was honored, posthumously with a "Decade of Service Award" plaque by the Citrus County Historical Society, given to the family, for being Citrus County's most dedicated pioneer woman. The plaque stated:

*For her appointment by Gov. Leroy Collins, who recognized her organizational ability, to the original advisory council of Central Florida Historical Society Commission.

*As a director of the Florida Historical Society and representative for the origin of the Citrus County Historical Commission and Society in 1963.

*For researching the life of U.S. Senator David L. Yulee and Yulee Sugar Mill at Homosassa and its establishment as a national shrine through her efforts. (Many a time she almost bodily defended the old mill during World War II from being carried off for scrap metal).

A proclamation was made declaring May 9, 1983 to be "Mary Isabell MacRae Day" in Citrus County.

Prior to the presentation, a large article titled "Honoring a Pioneer" was in the local newspaper, showing Mrs. MacRae on her Homosassa home dock and a picture of the MacRae General Store in Old Homosassa, as it appeared on a postcard in 1950-51.

The MacRae's lived in an old white house, thought to be owned by Joshua Chamberlain until the store was completed. They lived upstairs in the store until 1955. They then moved into a palm log home where the five log units are presently located, on property that was built by their son Duncan. The Homosassa Inn was purchased from Helen Willard Richardson in 1917, and taken possession by the MacRae's in 1931.

The family continues to operate the business that James and Mary began in 1915. Through hard work and dedication the business has grown to include 23 cabin units, an upgraded Bait House, and a Tiki Bar, now operated by the grandson of James and Mary MacRae. The Homosassa Inn, now a beautiful white southern style home, with a large front porch, is home to Wilma MacRae, after renovations in 1993 to make it a private residence.

In the Heritage Center in the old courthouse there is a room "Mary I MacRae" named after her. There is an exhibit titled "A Long Way Home" in that room.

Mary Isabell Wiggins MacRae died September 19, 1973 and is buried beside her husband James Alexander MacRae and daughter Marjorie E. MacRae in Stage Stand Cemetery across from the Homosassa Post Office on Suncoast Hwy (US Hwy 19).







Back row L-R: Duncan MacRae (son), Phillip Wiggins (Mary's brother from England), Jay Massicot (son-in-law, husband of daughter Jean),

2nd Row: Wilma MacRae (Duncan's wife) with infant daughter Kathy (me), Jean (daughter), Mary I., Betty McKennize (daughter), Marjorie (daughter)

Front Row: Grandchildren; Dunc Massicot, Jimmy (Duncan's son), Buzz (Duncan Jr.) Elizabeth McKennize, and Ronnie Massicot.

This is a great photo. If you notice the building in the background is a log cabin built by my dad. This picture was taken in the spring of 1956.