

Small Town Florida: ‘Gotta’ Smoke?

by Francis Ferguson



Some years ago, I was lucky enough to acquire a small holding of postal history (many with enclosures) that all came from a small town in southwest Florida as part of the Durrance family correspondence. Over the years the grouping continues to surprise as I explore them further. This particular envelop did not look terribly exciting, with a rather ratty opening on the right side and two very common 1¢ stamps from that era – but the enclosure was pure gold!

The letter dated December 22, 1913 tells of the destruction of a new cigar factory on the previous Friday night. A few minutes of searching the WWW resulted in the discovery of this report in what was the *Punta Gorda Herald*:

The new factory was completed in June of that year; but, alas, disaster struck a few days before Christmas, as reported by the *Herald*:

“Punta Gorda suffered a serious loss last Friday night when the new cigar factory and all its contents were destroyed by fire. Total loss is something over \$10,000 --- half of which is covered by insurance.”

“How the fire originated has not been determined, but it is believed it started from a lighted stump of a cigar carelessly tossed into some waste by a workman at the closing hour. The fire occurred about 10 o'clock. When first discovered, flames were bursting through the roof. An alarm was promptly given. Many citizens hurried to the scene. However, the factory was beyond reach of the water system. Nothing could be done to save it.”

“The factory, which had only recently been erected, cost \$3,500; and there was over \$5,000 worth of tobacco on hand. Add to this nearly \$2,000 in furniture and other appurtenances. Besides this, there is a loss to the business houses of town the wages of the 20 workmen who have been laid off for a time.”

“We are glad to report that, at a meeting of the directors held Monday night, arrangements were made to continue the business in a few days.”

“The directors agreed that A. Symonette, the foreman, might resume the business in his own name, manufacturing the same brands as heretofore. Mr. Symonette has secured the lower floor of the Masonic building where he will resume the manufacture of cigars as soon as he can lay in a supply of tobacco.”^{C1}

The transcription of the enclosure can be read below. The first part of the letter is not very interesting, but the postscript is!

Desoto County Telephone Co., Punta Gorda, Fla. 12/22/(19)13

My Dear Lillie –

Sent you a coat set consisting of a collar and cuffs. No Special way to put on cuffs. Hope you all have a Merry Xmas and get a heap of toys.

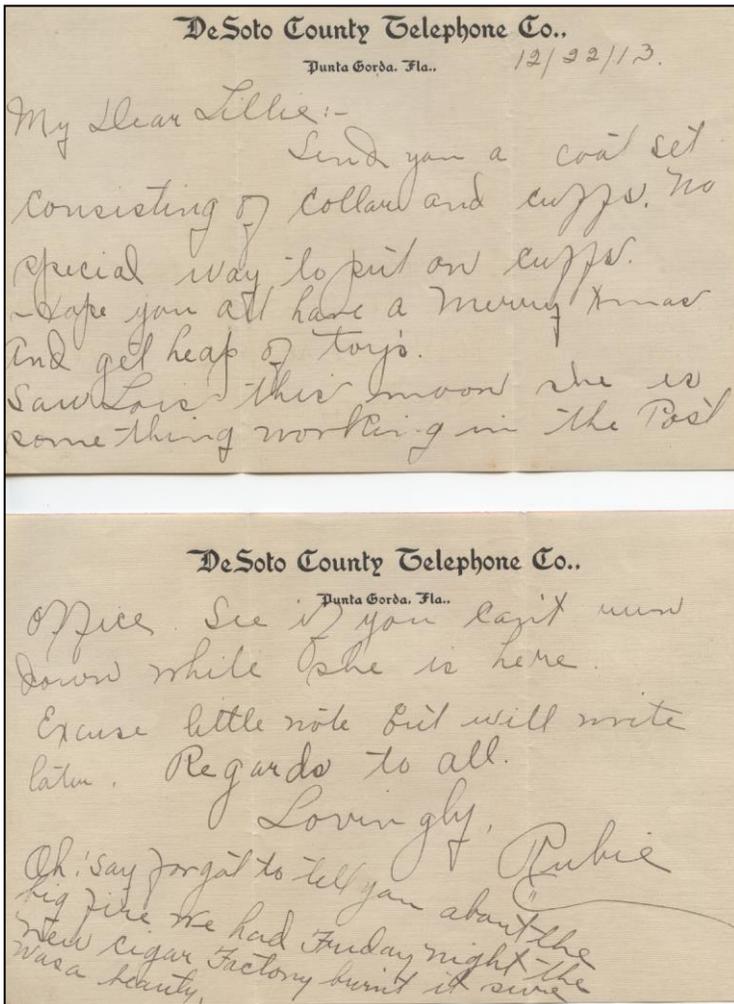
Saw Lois this noon she is something working in the Post Office. See if you can't run down while she is here.

Excuse little note but will write later.

Regards to all, Lovingly Rubie

Oh! Say forgot to tell you about the big fire we had Friday night – the new cigar Factory burnt it sure was a beauty.

[Editor's note: Factory burned on Friday 12.19.1913]



Efforts to fill in some of the personal history of Lillian Durrance have yielded little. It is known that she married George Mann, but again that seems to be a dead end. In a rather odd turn of events, while doing searches, it has become painfully obvious that Lillian's last name of Durrance and her married name of Mann are common, yielding way too many hits to filter through. A search on the name "George Mann" in an effort to link back to Lillian -- resulted in over 50,000 hits – again a dead end. The only piece of information uncovered was her birth month and year; October of 1899 thus she was 14 years old at the time of this letter. That age is consistent with the content of the letter.

Additional information on Lillian Durrance Mann must be hiding in some corner of the internet, but it will have to wait for a future time to be ferreted out.

[Editor's note: Thanks are extended to ASP for providing me with these pieces of Florida small town history!]

Footnote C1:

http://www.lindseywilliams.org/index.htm?Articles/Cigar_Manufacturing_At_Punta_Gorda_Went_Up_In_Smoke.htm~mainFrame