

# A Lowcountry Childhood in the 1940's

By John Samuel Graves, III



John Graves and his younger brother in Bluffton 1947

Once upon a time my brothers and I began our life adventures in the Lowcountry in the early 1940's. How did it happen? What was it that brought my mother, Florence Rubert, the daughter of a New York Yankee, and my father, John Samuel Graves, Jr., a country boy from Bluffton, South Carolina, together? What indeed! My mother had been very happy as a child living part of each year on Palmetto Bluff, and had come to know many of the Bluffton people. Some have said that she returned to Bluffton in her early twenties after a failed romance in New York – hoping to recapture some of her Palmetto Bluff childhood happiness. I will never know all the facts.

My parents were married in 1939. My mother was twenty three. Since there were no hospitals in Bluffton in 1941, my mother was taken to Savannah's Telfair Hospital for Women for our births. I was born there in



John Graves as a young boy

December of that year. I was given my father's name. There have been six generations with the name of John Samuel Graves. My younger brother was born there several years later. We lived in Bluffton in The Guilford House on Boundary Street (my father's grandparents' house). Our grandparents, John Samuel Graves, Sr. and Cora Jane Guilford Graves, lived in The Graves House on Calhoun Street. The two lots touched at the corners and there was a path between the two houses. Over the years we often wandered over to "Papa" and grandma's house. There we would explore "doodle bugs" and such beneath their house, or play on their expansive front and side porches. Occasionally, we would sneak up into their huge attic to play with an assortment of giant ride-on toy trains. We were not supposed to be up there because we might poke a hole in the ceiling and hurt ourselves. Sometimes we would hide in the closet under the attic stairs. We thought we were unobserved.

When we were old enough to put skates

on we actually skated on the porch! And sometimes inside our grandparents' house! (My grandparents were very tolerant and understanding.) They always had a double swing hanging on the porch and I can remember swinging with my grandmother. Once, my younger brother was swinging wildly with her, and they were tossed to the floor when the swing came unbolted from the ceiling and suddenly fell. She laughed and laughed. She was a very loving and supportive person, always smiling and laughing, always delivering encouraging words in challenging situations. We all loved her terribly. Every time we showed up at her house she always presented that loving, supporting side. If we ever had some serious problem she would help us find our way through it. She and Luke Peeples' mother were sisters.

We loved to go over to our grandparents' house and join them for breakfast, dinner or supper. Sometimes grandma fixed waffles for us in her iron waffle pan on her wood stove. I also remember especially butter beans, fried chicken and sometimes crab cakes. She made real crab cakes with little or no fillers. We also sometimes had fried or mull down oysters from my father's factory. We did not fully know or appreciate then how lucky we were to have living grandparents right next door. And, of course, at that age we were not aware that the house we lived in had been our grandmother Graves' parents' house. (For more about my parents and grandparents please read my earlier Breeze articles, especially *A Short History of Palmetto Bluff, Parts I and II*; *Boll Weevils and Oysters and A Story of Two Houses*. Those stories and other articles about the history of the Graves and Guilford families in Bluffton can be found on my website, [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org).)

As a child I didn't know much about my Guilford forebears, especially that my great granddad, George Sewell Guilford, had been the mayor of Bluffton many times. I also didn't know that he had built both the Graves House and the Guilford House himself, or that he had personally built the Methodist church's steeple and bell tower. (It was destroyed by hurricane in the year before I was born.) And I didn't know until recently that he had been instrumental in



John Graves and his younger brother, the intrepid tricyclists in 1946

establishing Bluffton's Methodist Church on their present site. (Read my articles, *The Accidents of Birth and The Ties That Bind, and Bluffton's Fateful Election of 1903*, and my *Almost Forgotten History of Bluffton's Methodist Church* on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org).)

Our earliest years in Bluffton were spent playing around and exploring the three or four blocks in Old Town Bluffton where we lived. Almost all of the streets were made of crushed oyster shell. We were a plucky and intrepid lot and "took to the road" daily on tricycles or on our bare feet, sometimes traveling as far as The Church of the Cross at the end of Calhoun Street where we had been baptized. (We were not allowed down on the dock in those early years.) We also traveled across Boundary street to visit Tommy Heyward and his sisters at their home, now called the Pine House. Other playmates included Hanky Cram and our first cousins, Beverly and "Sister" Getsinger. Johnny and Billy Cantrell lived right next door and we often played with them. (Their parents brought the telephone to Bluffton.) Years later, Billy, while riding his bike, was hit by a car and killed. The incident was one of our first encounters with death – puzzling, confusing and sorrowful.

We used to go to Fripp's Store (now gone) on the corner of Calhoun and Bridge Streets and buy a coke (in the bottle), a 3 dip ice cream cone and several large cookies for 25 cents. Our father's first cousin, Luke Peebles, lived less than two blocks from our house and we went there often to play around his gold fish pond, explore the cove behind his house, or listen to him play his piano and tell us some of the stories behind his compositions. We called him "Uncle Luke." Over the years he became a very powerful influence in my life. It was largely from him and my mother that I gained my lifelong interest in music and literature. For a short while I took piano instruction from him and years after he died I edited his musical compositions. (I have a degree in music composition and theory. See more information about Luke and his music on my website, [astarfell.com](http://astarfell.com).)



Church of the Cross choir with Florence Graves, Naomi McCracken, Olive Pinckney, & others

Our little world presented many attractions and temptations. Our father had a very large grape arbor in the back yard. We used to climb up into it and eat grapes and secretly hide there. We thought that the "grown ups" didn't know we were up there. Another of our favorite activities was making weapons from palmetto stalks: bows and arrows, swords, knives, etc. The wood was soft and easy to carve handles on. The fronds made excellent roof and wall covers for hide-a-ways and forts. We did not then realize that we were honing our skills for survival in the adult world, that we would someday have to become self-sufficient, self-reliant, competent, and prepared for self-defense. Such experiences would come in handy as we moved into adulthood. Much of what we later accomplish or become starts with these simple childhood acts – and, of course, luck.

Other activities included going down with our Dad to his Bluffton and Trimbleston oyster factories where we had our first encounters with the magical May river and Saw Mill Creek and all the strange creatures in and around them, especially oysters, shrimp and crabs. Trimbleston also had some of the biggest rattlesnakes ever! My father once killed one that was nearly six feet long and as big around as a man's arm.



The Oyster Plant shuckers

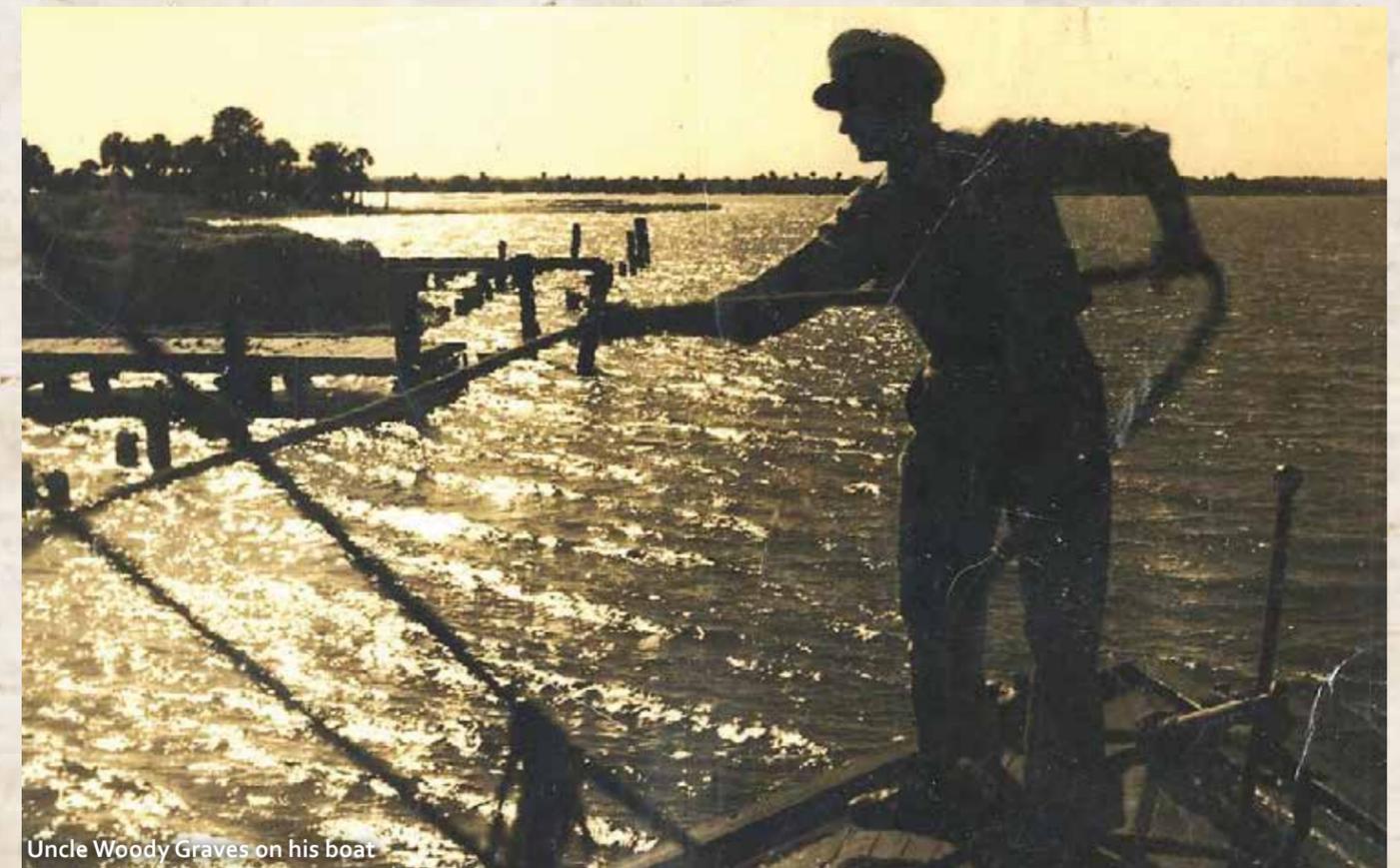
These trips also introduced us to the miracle of boats, especially shrimp boats and oyster batteaux. I was fascinated with how they built those flat bottomed boats, and how they bent the side walls. I was intrigued with all things to do with building. My interest in construction and how things went together has followed me all my life – into carpentry and home design, into music composition and into writing. Our trips to Trimbleston were wonderful adventures into mystery and beauty. Saw Mill Creek was utterly isolated and pristine in those days.

My brothers and I were filled with the desire for adventure and exploration as most children are. Sometimes I'm sure we thought we were masters of our world. In my early years I often felt that I could turn my days on and off with the click of my fingers.

I try not to see things through rose colored glasses, but in a very real sense I lived out my earliest years in a magical time and place, surrounded by aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents, often living within just a few blocks of my home. My grandfather Graves had been mayor and some of his brothers or cousins were often the town constable. I felt firmly situated within my tribe, safe from the threats of the outside world, free to roam my little restricted domain without supervision, free to ride forth and experience life on a daily basis without fear. Those days of adventure and wonder are gone now, but not forgotten. Experiencing Bluffton's original square mile as a young child has marked me as one of Bluffton's own forever, and drives me to this day in my actions, aspirations and achievements.



Hanky Cram, Tommy Heyward, John S. Graves. III



Uncle Woody Graves on his boat