

Ms. Potter Palmer and the Improvement of Florida Cattle Ranching

Bertha Potter was one of the most important early settlers in Sarasota, Florida. She was also a brilliant business woman and was in the top tier of society in Chicago before she moved to Florida.

Bertha Matilde Honore was born in Louisville, Kentucky on May 22, 1849. She died on July 25, 1918 in Osprey, Florida. While growing up she had a reputation as a gifted musician and a brilliant writer.

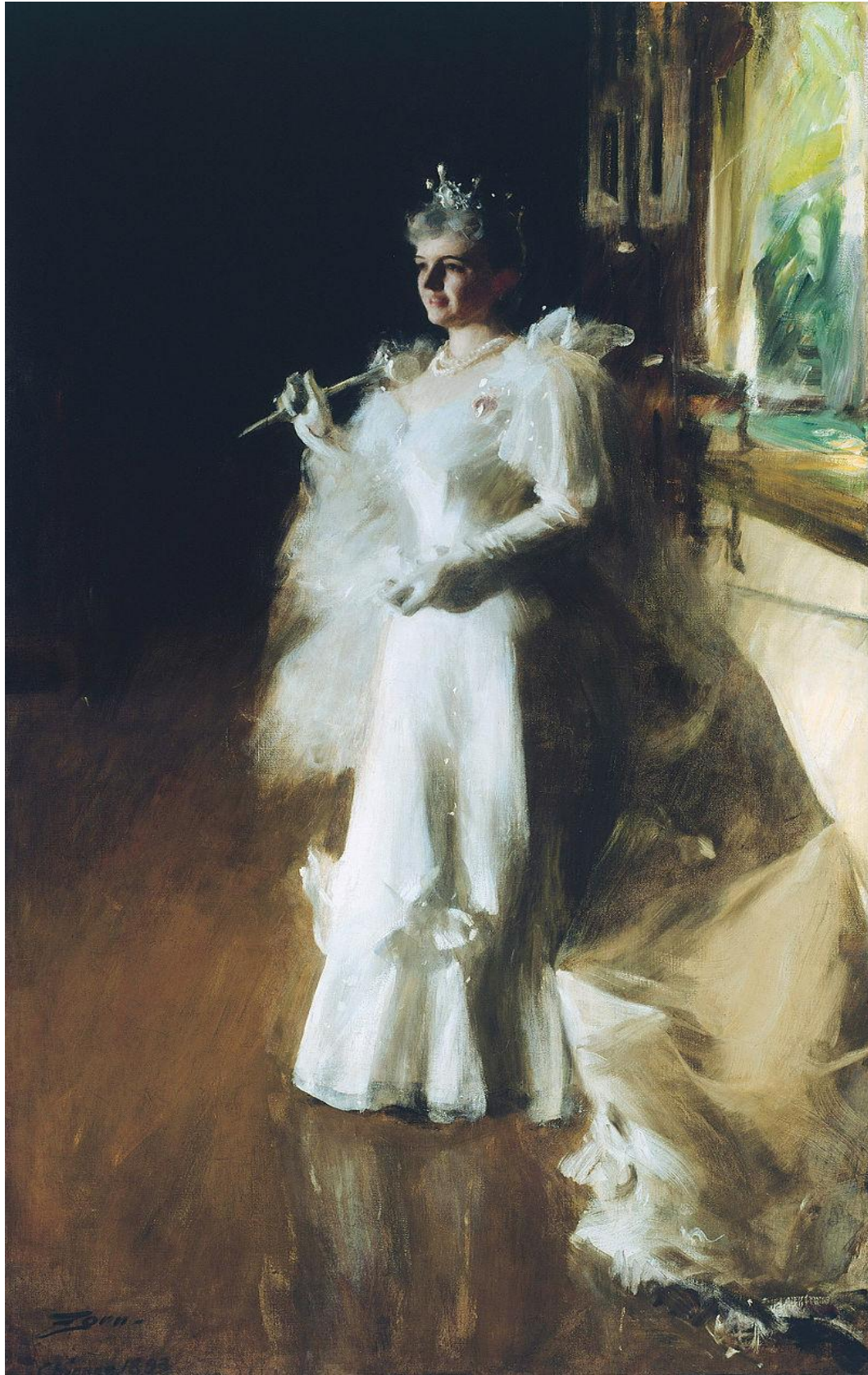
She is cited in this book on Florida inventions because she pioneered a method of protecting Florida cattle from tick -borne diseases. Interestingly she is also credited with inventing chocolate brownie cookies.

Her life before she moved to Florida is fascinating and would probably make a great movie. Her father moved the family from Louisville KY to Chicago IL when she was six in 1855. Her father was quite wealthy and she grew up in Chicago high society.

As was common in those days she was sent to a Finishing School in Washington DC to learn what was thought to be appropriate for girls in those days. Later in life Berthe Potter would champion women's rights and be leader of many women's causes. She would also succeed in the "man's" world of business where she was extremely successful. She also succeeded in the even more masculine world of Florida cattle ranching when she had the largest ranch in Florida and was head of the Cattlemen's Association.

In 1870 Berthe Honore married Peter Potter, a Chicago business tycoon. She was 21 at the time of the marriage and he was 44. Potter had failed twice in business but turned it around by creating a retail store that later became Marshall Fields. He also built the famous Palmer House Hotel in Chicago. In 1874 Ms. Potter had her first son, Honore, and in 1875 she had her second son, Peter Palmer II.

A portrait of the young Ms. Potter was painted by Anders Zorn in 1863 and is taken from Wikipedia:



It is of historical interest that Mrs. Potter's sister Ida married Frederick Dent Grant, the son of President Ulysses S. Grant, in 1899 and Mrs. Palmer arranged the wedding. Her niece Julia Dent Grant married a Russian Prince at the Palmer estate in Newport, Rhode Island. The couple later moved to Sarasota where Prince Cantacazune became President of Palmer Bank.

Mrs. Palmer was a member of the Chicago Woman's Club which supported women's right. They also funded kindergarten class for small children until the City added kindergartens to regular grade schools.

In the year 1893 Chicago had The World's Columbian Exposition to celebrate the discovery of America by Columbus in 1492. (The author is aware of earlier possible discoverers including the Vikings circa 1100 and Prince Henry Sinclair in 1398.)

Mrs. Palmer was named President of the Board of Lady Managers for the Exposition. One of the interesting exhibits was a Woman's Building. The Board of Lady Managers led by Mrs. Palmer requested that the U.S. Mint produce a commemorative coin. The result was the Isabella quarter, which had a portrait of Queen Isabella of Spain, who supported Columbus. Today in 2020 these quarters are worth thousands of dollars.



The reverse of the coin was to commemorate historical women workers, and showed a kneeling figure at a spindle.

It is of historical interest that there was a Board of Men Managers and the two boards sometimes disagreed. For example the Board of Lady Managers wanted to eliminate the “Egyptian Girls” dancing show as being obscene, but they were over ruled. As it happened the Egyptian Girls show was one of the top money makers of the exposition.



Readers can see the engraving citing the Board of Lady Manager on the back of the coin.

It is of historical interest that when Potter Palmer was having his lawyer draft his last will he put in a clause that if Mrs. Palmer re married a large sum of money should go to her second husband. His lawyer asked why Mr. Palmer wanted such an unusual clause, and the reply was “If she re marries he will need the money.” Mr. Palmer died in 1902. As it happened Mrs. Potter did not re marry.

In 1900 President McKinley appointed Mrs. Palmer to be a member of a national commission to represent the United States at the Paris Exposition. She was the only female member, and also the only member to be awarded the French Legion of Honor medal.

Mrs. Palmer was friends with the highest levels of society in many countries including Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of President Lincoln; King Edward VII of England; Lord Salisbury the Prime Minister of England; and many more.

Mrs. Palmer's Florida Years

After a lifetime of affluence and high society it is not clear why Mrs. Palmer elected to go Sarasota and try agriculture and cattle ranching, neither of which had she done before.

One motivating factor was a newspaper ad placed in the Chicago Tribune on January 10, 1910 by a Florida entrepreneur from Sarasota named Joseph H. Lord. He had opened an office in Chicago in order to acquire clients. He himself owned about 70,000 acres near Sarasota. It is known that Mrs. Palmer read the ad and started investigations about Mr. Lord. By coincidence the Chicago offices of Joseph Lord were in the same building as the Palmer family offices.

For whatever reason Mrs. Potter and her father, brother, and others decided to visit Sarasota and explore the properties first-hand. They arrived in February of 1910. As might be expected they had a private railroad car. (A visit to the Ringling Museum in Sarasota will show what private rail cars looked like.)

Thus In 1910 at the age of 61 Mrs. Potter became interested in Florida's warm climate and purchased about 80,000 acres of land in and around Sarasota. (Some of her land became Myakka State Park and another property became Spanish Point. Both are popular with residents and tourists in the Sarasota area.) In 1914 she purchased an additional 19,000 acres in Temple Terrace, which was later sold by her family and in 2020 is the Temple Terrace Golf Club and community.

At the time Mrs. Palmer came to Sarasota the population was about 840 people, primarily engaged in farming and fishing.

Mrs. Palmer named some of the roads and streets and today in 2020 the names remain: Honore, Tuttle, Lockwood, Webber, and Macintosh were all named by Mrs. Palmer.

Before acquiring property and Mrs. Palmer hired a number of experts and specialists to provide opinions about soil conditions and the quality of the timber. (This was before most invasive species such as Australian pines and Brazilian peppers had arrived.)

A photo of Mrs. Palmer from her Sarasota days is taken from Wikimedia Commons:



Once Mrs. Palmer acquired the land around Sarasota she introduced several kinds of cattle and also planted gardens. Her ranch was called Meadow Sweet Pastures and today it is part of Myakka State Park. She also joined the Florida Livestock Association. As with her other activities, Mrs. Palmer was a gifted scholar who liked to understand things that interested her.

Once she owned property she started a number of innovations including citrus trees, formal gardens, and fencing her cattle lands to keep the cows from straying. To guard against tick-borne fevers which decimated Florida herds cattle could be dipped in concrete tanks with a solution of arsenic and soda. Local cattle breeders thought that dipping might kill the cows but it did not; instead it protected them from ticks.

Mrs. Palmer's first cattle dipping took place on November of 1915/ The local newspaper, the Herald Tribune, said that it was more important to the county than any stone laying or monument might be.

A photo of a cattle dip tank in Florida is taken from Seminole Nation. As can be seen the tanks are made of concrete and the cattle are pushed in one end and wade out the other end free from ticks:

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Obviously a few ticks might remain on the heads of the cattle but dipping killed over 99% of the ticks and reduced the incidence of tick fevers.

References

A 2007 Masters' Thesis from the University of South Florida by Hope L. Black contains a biography of Mrs. Palmer and information about her many activities in both Chicago and Florida. The title is "Mounted on a Pedestal: Bertha Honore Palmer; November 8, 2007.