Looking Back
Third in a series
By Betty Chandler Williamson

A great variety of women blazed trails into leadership positions in Okeechobee County, paths that contemporary women are following to this day.

Merida Drawdy Raulerson
(1880-1979)
Merida Drawdy Raulerson was a midwife who delivered over 500 babies. She was born to George and Emily Drawdy of Georgia. They moved to Fort Drum in the 1890s. “Aunt Meridy” as she was called, once stated, “I never lost a baby, but one was unable to breathe when first delivered; I held a clean cloth over the babe’s mouth and nose and gently breathed into the openings; the child began to cry and lived a long life.” My mother, Sadie King Chandler, once assisted her with the birthing of a neighboring woman. “Aunt Meridy” had several children of her own. Her daughter Zora Raulerson Coker was Jack and Marjorie Coker’s mother.

Rachel Crozier
(Circa 1907)
Rachel Crozier was the first female principal of Okeechobee schools. Born in Tallahassee, she received her bachelor’s education at the University of Arkansas, and later earned her master’s degree at the University of Florida. Miss Crozier arrived in Okeechobee in 1929 and began teaching English and history in the local school system. The records at the school board office state that she was appointed to the assistant principal position in 1933. The school board minutes show she was approved to become the principal of the “Okeechobee City Schools” in 1934 and served until 1935. In 1938, she and her sister, Cordelia Crozier (also a teacher at Okeechobee High School) moved to Palm Beach County. Miss Crozier was employed at the then-Palm Beach Junior College (PBJC) and began teaching school in the English department. She also gave her inspiring guidance and effort in the publication of the Beachcomber and the Galleon. She later became the first dean of women at PBJC. She retired in 1963. Other female principals of OHS have been Phoebe Raulerson, Barbara James and Toni Jones Wiersma.

Katie Bell Cate Blackburn
(b. 1913)
Katie Bell Cate Blackburn is perhaps the oldest living female in Okeechobee County as of today. Her parents were both Floridians, born in Zolfo Springs. She married Crockett Cate, who worked for Western Union. They had one daughter, Emma Louise Cate, who married Cecil Harden of Okeechobee. Ms. Katie has three grandchildren, Terry Harden, Kay Sheedy and Randy Harden. She is also a great-grandmother to Matthew, Michael, Cody, Colby and Katie. There are also five great-great-grandchildren. After being widowed, she remarried; his name was Glenn Blackburn, who also worked for Western Union. She moved back to Okeechobee after he died in 1997. She became a member of the local First Baptist Church in May 1964.

Lenora Chandler Cothern Walker
(b. 1914)
Lenora Chandler Cothern Walker is probably the oldest “native” of Okeechobee still alive. John Le Baron and Katherine (Katie Raulerson) Chandler were her parents; her four siblings were Larue, Beulah, Roderick and Glen. She attended Okeechobee schools, met and married her husband, Van H. Cothern, in 1930. He was a U.S. engineer/surveyor during the construction of the Hoover Dam. The couple lived in Clewiston and in the states of Maine, New York and Alaska during the 29 years she was absent from Okeechobee. The two had one son, John Leland, born in 1938. Years after her husband’s death, she married Woodrow Walker. Lenora has a pleasant personality and is very alert. I am proud she is a cousin of mine.

Alma Camp Burr
(b. circa 1914)
Alma Camp Burr is the first Okeechobee High School graduate to teach in the local schools. Alma was also a member of the first class to graduate in 1921, with two members. She was married to F.E. Burr; they had one son, Hudson. I recall Mrs. Burr teaching the second-grade class; I was one of her pupils. She and her family were members of the First Baptist Church of Okeechobee. The couple moved to Canal Point in 1954. (Photo not available.)
Delores Gardner Harvey (b. 1926)
Delores Gardner Harvey was the first female coach for the girls’ basketball team at OHS. There was a female basketball team here in the 1930s, with a male coach. For years, OHS had no basketball teams because we did not have a gym. The original gymnasium/auditorium, built in 1916, attached to the new brick school of that era, blew down in the 1935 hurricane. Another gym was constructed in the late 1940s, so basketball was added to the OHS athletic program. Mrs. Harvey agreed to train female students who were to make up the team. The first games since the 1930s began in the 1949-50 school year. Mrs. Harvey also taught in the elementary school and history at OHS. She was born in Chicago; her parents, Jack and Marjorie Gardner, moved to Boynton Beach where she graduated from the local high school. She received her teaching degree in 1948 at Florida State University. Carl T. Durrance, the then-Indian River Community College (IRCC) at the Dixon-Hendry Campus, and they have two children, Blaine and Valerie, and three grandchildren. Mrs. Harvey taught for over 50 years in the Okeechobee school system. The then-Indian River Community College (IRCC) at the Dixon-Hendry Campus, Okeechobee, Palm Beach State College, Tony Ard, Alan Chandler, Dan Thomas, Frank (Sonny) Williamson Jr. Special acknowledgements to the Okeechobee County School District administration office, City of Okeechobee, IRSC (Indian River State College) at Dixon-Hendry Campus, Okeechobee, Palm Beach State College, Tony Ard, Alan Chandler, Dan Thomas, Jack and Mildred Coker, Edith Hansel Hester, Terry Harden, Mygi Cable, Heather Williamson Rucks and my husband, Frank “Sonny” Williamson Jr., is also a fifth-generation Floridian.

Edna Erma Hansel
Edna Erma Hansel was the first female of Okeechobee to enlist in the WAVES in World War II (the Naval Reserve’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service program). She is the daughter of Henry and Lillian Driggers Hansel. She had five siblings, Leona, Edith, Earl, Betty Jean and Patricia Ann. Her brother Earl joined the Navy during WWII; then, during the Korean War, in the early 1950s, he was drafted into the Army. He became a prisoner and died in a prisoner of war camp in Korea. Edna was raised in Bluefield, Fla., with her family and graduated from Okeechobee High School. She married Earl Crostic; they had one son, Earl Jr. She is of the Mormon faith and was involved with family research.

Charlotte Bass Delagall (b. 1927)
Charlotte Bass Delagall was the first black home economics teacher at Okeechobee High School. She was born in Kendrick, in Marion County. Her father was Joey Bass, who was employed to sort mail on the trains. Her mother was Maude L. Johnson, a teacher and domestic worker. Charlotte attended Kendrick Elementary School, Fessenden Academy and Howard Academy. She graduated from Florida A&M University with a bachelor’s degree in home economics and a minor in elementary education. She pursued further studies at the University of Florida and Florida Atlantic University. Charlotte married Daniel Delagall Jr. and the couple had two sons, Tony and Daniel. She has one sister, Joyce Bass. She is still active in her church. I count her as my friend, as she has assisted me many times with my search for local information.

Mary Ann Raulerson Thomas Dana
Mary Ann Raulerson Thomas Dana was the first full-time female probation and parole officer for Okeechobee. She was born in Clarkesville, Ga., to Maurice Jackson and Mary Frances Rush Raulerson. She was one of five children. The family moved to Okeechobee in the summer of 1955. She attended Okeechobee schools and graduated from Okeechobee High School in 1969. Mary Ann began substitute-teaching after graduation. She married Ronald Edgar Thomas, and they became the parents of two sons. Daniel Edgar is a teacher in the Okeechobee public schools, and Randall Jackson is a corporal with the Okeechobee County Sheriff’s Office. With the children in school, she again began substitute-teaching and also took classes at Indian River Community College. She transferred those credits to Florida Atlantic University and graduated from FAU in 1981. She was again employed in the local school system as a third-grade teacher at North Elementary. Mary Ann became very involved with the local Farm Bureau and was appointed chairwoman for the Florida Farm Bureau Women’s Program. In 1982 she was offered a position with the Florida Department of Corrections as a probation and parole officer. She taught Drug Abuse Reduction Education, the well-known “DARE” drug education program, for 18 years while employed with the Okeechobee County Sheriff’s Office. She was instrumental, under the direction of Schools Superintendent Phoebe Raulerson, with four other teachers, in creating S.T.A.R.S., a special 12-week drug education program. Mary Ann was remarried to Detective Edwin W. Dana of the OCSO. They are both retired and enjoy spending time with family and friends and traveling.

Lydia Jean Ard Williams (b. 1960)
Lydia Jean Williams was the first and only female to be elected to the Okeechobee City Council, serving from January 2005 to January 2009. Her parents were Brashear and Rosie Leitner Ard, who had seven children. Lydia Jean graduated from Okeechobee High School in 1978. She is married to Lewis Williams. Their four children are Casey, Chris, Jeannie and Jena; and they also have eight grandchildren. For several years, she was employed by the City of Okeechobee. She was the first female director of Main Street, and was also the first recipient of the Mayor’s Citizen of the Year Paragon Award. This photo of Lydia Jean was taken at her last Okeechobee City Council meeting as a council member.

About the Author
Betsy Chandler Williamson is a fifth-generation Floridian; her roots go back to the mid-1800s. Her husband of more than 60 years, Frank “Sonny” Williamson Jr., is also a fifth-generation Floridian.
Her hobbies are genealogy and local history. She has been president of the Okeechobee Historical Society for over two decades. Williamson is the co-author (with Twila Valentine, now deceased) of Striking Down Country Roads. She was responsible for compiling the first 75 years of the membership of the First Baptist Church of Okeechobee, where she taught Sunday school for 39 years and served as director of the Girls Auxiliary Mission Club for many years. She was also the church historian for a period of time. Williamson wishes to thank the following people for assisting her with the articles she submits:
- Sonny, who encourages his wife to write.
- Heather Williamson Rucks, a granddaughter, who assists with emailing the material to Okeechobee The Magazine.
- A writing club she belongs to, The Okeechobee Writers League (OWL), led by published author Jan Fehrman.
- Sonny Elliott for re-producing the photographs.

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