

# A Different Dream

The History of North Merritt Island, the Town of Wilson, and the Austin Family



By Douglas Guy Holzman

# Preface

*This book is dedicated to my Grandfather, Guy Austin and my mother, Marjorie Ruth (Austin) Holzman who kept his dreams of North Merritt Island alive.*

Additional family stories may be found here:

- 1) “Family Stories” by Douglas Guy Holzman, not published  
Stories and pictures from the life of Dougals Guy Holzman and family
- 2) “Children's Stories” by Douglas Guy Holzman, not published  
A collection of children's stories based on family events. This was written for my children, Justin and Stephen and read to them as they were growing up.
- 3) “The Hollister Family of America” by Lieut. John Hollister, Chicago Fergus Printing Company 1886. Available on Google digital books  
A Hollister family history dating back to the 1500s. I am connected to the Hollister family through my mother, Marjorie Ruth (Austin) Holzman, whose mother was Esther (Hollister) Austin.
- 4)** As an extension of research done by Lieut. John Hollister, my mother, Marjorie Ruth (Austin) Holzman did further research and entered family history into “Ancestry.com”

## Chapter 1

### Leaving Home

The history of a region is a history of families, made from of thousands of individual family stories. This is the story of one family, my family.

My mother had always talked about a town in Florida that her father, my grandfather Guy Austin, had founded. It was on an island. The name of the town was Wilson. So in the winter of 1985 when I finally decided to leave the family home in Chicago and move to Florida, I was the unwitting family member to take up the search for the lost town of Wilson, Florida.

It was the coldest day in the history of Chicago, the day I left Chicago for good. It was minus 27 degrees - no wind chill factored into that temperature, this was the actual temperature! It was cold. I had everything packed that morning, all that was left was to hitch up my 14 foot Hobie Cat sailboat and head south. Needless to say, it is not a common thing to trailer a sailboat in Chicago in the winter, especially when it was 27 degrees below zero. But there I was, in the predawn hours, attaching the boat to the back of my Nissan 300 ZX in the outdoor boat storage lot. After chopping away the ice surrounding the boat, and dangerously removing my gloves to attach the hitch to the car, I was finally moving to Florida. That is, if I can pull out of the lot without getting stuck in the snow; which after a few tries, I was able to do. I got on the road at sun rise. People do stare at a sports car towing a sail boat – in the middle of winter in Chicago. The boat attached to the car, meant you had to go through the manual lanes of the Illinois Tollway. I'll never forget the expression on the face of the toll booth collector as I stopped to pay my toll. "Going sailing today are you?" he asked with a grin ear to ear. I responded, "Do you see the direction this car is headed? I'm going south!" To this day, that toll booth collector probably tells the story about how he has seen it all in his career, including on the coldest day in the history of Chicago, how he saw a young man driving a sports car and towing a sailboat on that cold January morning of 1985.



It was a treacherous trip. The roads from Chicago were covered with ice and snow. They closed the interstate roads through the mountains about ½ hour after I got through the Chattanooga pass. Icy roads are one thing in the north, but through Georgia and north Florida, states that are not as prepared as Illinois, it's just down right dangerous. But I made it. The freeze line was just north of Orlando, my destination. By the time I got there, it felt like summer to me. I was quite comfortable in a tee shirt and could not understand all the natives bundled up in their winter parkas.

I settled in to my new career, my new life in Florida, having grown up a Midwestern boy. I did a half hearted search of the local maps, but I could not find a town called Wilson. To be honest, I did not have that much interest. But my mother insisted it was there somewhere. She claimed we even took an excursion drive through the town on one of our family vacations to Florida in the 1950s. She does not recall where it was, but says it is somewhere on the east coast, not too far south of St. Augustine. I assure her, there is no such town. As far as I was concerned, that was it.

I did not return to the frozen north, at least not more than I had to. But a couple of years later, at Christmas in Chicago, my mother brought up the subject again. She insisted it was real, her father founded a town in Florida, it was named Wilson, and it was on an island. She could not remember the island's name. At this family gathering, my uncle, uncle Don, happened to be with us, and he verified my mother's story. Only he remembered the name of the island – it was Merritt Island, and he said that my grandfather owned the island, and that he had indeed founded the town of Wilson. That stirred my mother's memory and she concurred. I laughed, "Do you know how big Merritt Island is? That cannot be true, or we would be a very rich family."

I again dismissed the Wilson story as simply a family legend, especially my family owning Merritt Island. But this time, I was a little bit more intrigued.

I did not know my grandfather, the man whose middle name I share. He died of lung cancer long before I was born, in Chicago when my mother was just 16. He left behind his wife, my grandmother Ester Austin, of course my mother, and her brother (uncle Don) and half brother (uncle Ken). Little did I realize at the time, that it was the stories a father tells his young children, stories of the adventure and great deeds of youth that lived on; long after he was gone.

My mother, a young girl growing up in Chicago, heard stories of her father fighting off wild boar, and alligators in the Florida wilderness. She heard stories of a town her father founded, and all the land he once owned on an island in Florida. A father has a duty to instill dreams in his young children, and to three children growing up in Chicago, the vision of their father's island in Florida must surely have generated as much excitement and wonder as if it had been Tahiti. In retrospect, it was perfectly natural for both my uncle and mother to claim that their father owned an island in Florida, it was called



Merritt Island. And as with so many family legends, the core of the claim is founded in the truth. There is something in a man's youth that allows him to take great risks that often become the stuff of legends in his later years. So it was with my grandfather.

I came to realize I was not the first family member to leave Chicago and seek fame, fortune and a better life (warmer) in Florida.

## **Chapter 2**

### **A New Florida Life**

There was a job waiting for me in Orlando thanks to a long time friend I had met in Chicago. But within about two weeks of my start date, the company managers called us all into a conference room and announced they were closing our division. I was stunned, here I uprooted myself from family and friends and a budding career in Chicago for two weeks of the better life in Florida, now only to be laid off. Obviously I had no seniority. I had a serious discussion with my long time friend. How could he have recruited me into such a mess? He assured me that my job was secure; he had heard the layoff was coming, and confirmed up to the president of the division that I would not be among those laid off. Relieved, but concerned; my friend then told me that my (new) job was secure because it was in computer technical arena, but his management job was not. He was laid off. That was just great, here I'm new with this company in Orlando, all these layoffs are taking place around me, and my mentor was leaving. But, he added, he found a new job at the Kennedy Space Center, and it had better not take as long to come to work for him over there, as it had to get me to move to Florida.

Well, it did not take very long. In less than a year, I forgave my friend, and I accepted a job at the Kennedy Space Center; where I spent the next 25 years of my life.

When Challenger exploded in January 1986, it was only the third launch I had ever seen. There I was, a KSC rookie from Chicago standing among the space center veterans wondering what had gone wrong. Millions of Americans knew the extent of the tragedy before we did. The TV cameras could show a close up of the pictures, over and over. The images are now forever etched into the American public, but standing there live, we had no benefit of a video tape, with the analytical commentators review the odds and speculating about the fate of our astronauts. Those of us who witnessed it, we expected the orbiter to return to the KSC landing strip, and frantically searched the sky for its distinctive image as it came around for an emergency landing. Only gradually did each of us, one at a time, come to the realization that the orbiter was lost.



And there I was again, facing the possibility of lay offs and NASA restructuring in the wake of the tragedy. I worked my way through difficult years at NASA. Working in the Information Technology (IT) area for the base operations contractor afforded me exposure to a variety of different NASA applications. From my office window, I could look out and see the Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB). Of course, from anywhere on KSC you can look out and see the VAB! But I had no idea I was also looking out my office window and seeing the land my grandfather once owned. The lost town of Wilson I was searching for was right under my nose all along.

My short career in Orlando ended up to have the greatest impact on my life, as I met a native Florida girl, fell in love and ended up getting married in 1988. I have two wonderful boys from this marriage. Unfortunately, the marriage did not last and I was divorced in 1993. I had no idea how much I had in common with my grandfather, some 70 years earlier. But I spent my days raising the kids, dealing with life as a single dad, and survival through the lean NASA years. The search for Wilson faded into a distant memory. The search never completely went away; it just was not a priority.

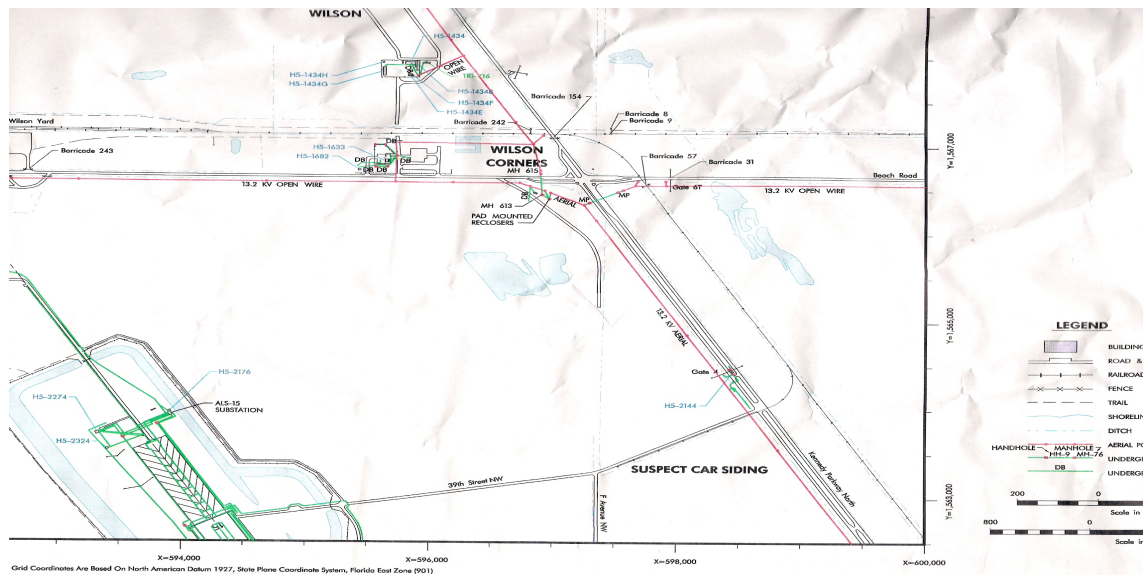
## **Chapter 3**

### **Wilson Discovered**

The aspect of my career that kept me going, for over thirty years, is that in the IT business, you have the opportunity to explore new things. No new project is quite the same as the last, and get the opportunity to work with all kinds of people, from Engineers and Scientists, to Accountants and everybody in between. My job was with the Base Operations Contractor (EG&G Florida) until the contract was re-bid and taken over by Space Gateway Support (SGS) in 1998. The SGS contract combined NASA and Air Force Space Command operations into a single spaceport support contract, covering all of Cape Canaveral. I was fortunate enough to make it through the transition to the new company, without so much as missing a beat. Well, not entirely without missing a beat, because going through the trauma of a KSC contract change over is not an easy thing. You are laid off from the company loosing the contract, and go through the stress of interviewing with the incoming contractor in hopes of keeping your job. I made it through.

During the second year of the new NASA contract, in 2000, by chance I was assigned to a computer project involved with creating a Geographic Information System (GIS). We contracted an imaging company to fly over KSC, taking aerial photography of every square inch of the Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Center. Through this project, I met and worked with the KSC map makers. We merged the fly over photos with the grids

and maps of KSC and for a short time, the duration of this particular computer project, I had access to a wealth of mapping information. And there it was, Wilson Corners. Right there on the internal KSC map. I drove by the area one weekend. I cannot believe it, there is actually a sign up on the highway identifying it, Wilson Corners. Thanks to my chance assignment to this project, having access to the expert map makers, I was able to confirm this was the site of a town. It was the long lost town of Wilson, it had disappeared from all the Florida maps because the town, and all the property was purchased by the government in the early 1960's to make way for the space port. I called my mother that night to confirm that, after over a decade of searching, I had finally found the lost town of Wilson.



I became quite the celebrity for a time at KSC. I found there had been several towns that were purchased by NASA to form the Kennedy Space Center. Each town had a story. But there I was, the front page news of the local KSC paper!

They got most of the story right, with several glaring errors. The town was called Wilson, it became Wilson's Corners after NASA acquired it. And the property was not purchased, it was granted under the homestead act. Thomas Jefferson Austin and Guy Austin were each granted 160 acres, making a total of 320 acres.

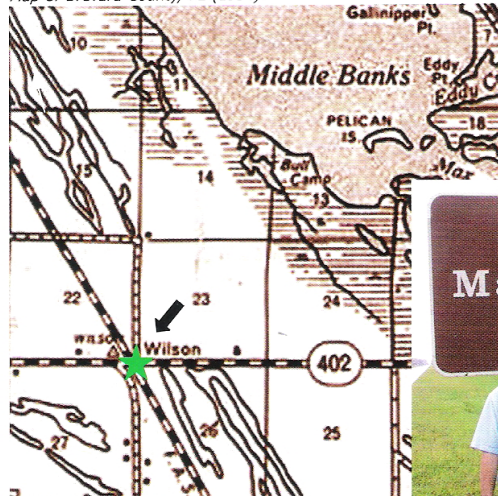


## In Search of Wilson's Corner

Employee Discovers Roots at KSC

It's unusual when research for a work project brings information to light about your personal family history. That's what happened to **Doug Holzman**, SGS Management Information Services (MIS) Senior IT Manager, when he was assigned to support the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team with information technology services. During the duration of the project, Doug put in many hours researching and reviewing project-specific information. That's when he came across some very surprising family history facts – his family used to own a sizeable portion of Kennedy Space Center!

Map of Brevard County, FL (1954)



Corner is located at the very north end of KSC (at Beach Road and State Road 3, northwest corner). In 1915 the family lived off the land by hunting and fishing, and commuted to Titusville by boat across the Indian River. They also opened a general store and post office. According to Doug, his family petitioned government officials in Washington, D.C. for permission to establish a post office. The Austin's proposed that the post office be named Wilson's Corner in honor of the president at that time, Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson approved the petition.



At long last, Doug sets foot in Wilson's Corner.

While growing up as a child in Illinois, Doug's parents told him of property his family once owned in Florida named *Wilson's Corner*. Upon joining the spaceport team many years ago, he was encouraged by his mother to find Wilson's Corner. Since no one in the present family knew exactly where Wilson's Corner had been located, Doug's search for information concerning the town was challenging. Throughout the years, although he never gave up his search, he no longer made it a priority. Then one day, while reviewing some old geographical maps, there it was – Wilson's Corner.

Doug's family is unsure of how long the Austin family owned the property, but eventually they sold the land and returned to Illinois. Although Wilson's Corner did not survive as a community, it still remains an important part of history and of KSC.

Thanks, Doug, for sharing your family history with your coworkers and the Spaceport community! ▲

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## Chapter 4

### Florida Resort Town; Near the Beach....

My Grandfather Guy Austin, and Great Grandfather Thomas Jefferson Austin, could not have dreamed that one day men would leave for the moon from the little town they founded on a desolate island in Florida. Theirs was a dream of a different future for the town of Wilson.

President Teddy Roosevelt had designated most of Merritt Island as a national forest preserve. After pressure from Florida politicians, President William Howard Taft in 1912 threw open almost all of North Merritt Island to homesteaders. An adult male, was entitled to 160 acres of public land, provided they built a house upon it during the first year, and during the second year further improved the land, usually by “cultivating” at least 5 acres. Most of the homesteads consisted of scrub palmetto, pine trees and a large portion of prairie land under a few inches of water. There were settlements on the mainland, the west side of the Indian River. Titusville to the west of Wilson, and Cocoa to the south. At the time, Cocoa was a quiet town of 650 people. There was no Cocoa Beach. In fact, land on the barrier islands, all along Florida's coast was considered undesirable property, it was “God forsaken land..” Some of the residents even joked “the barrier islands are not part of the United States”. The barrier islands were a mosquito ridden, alligator infested, wild boar roaming, good for nothing - swamp.

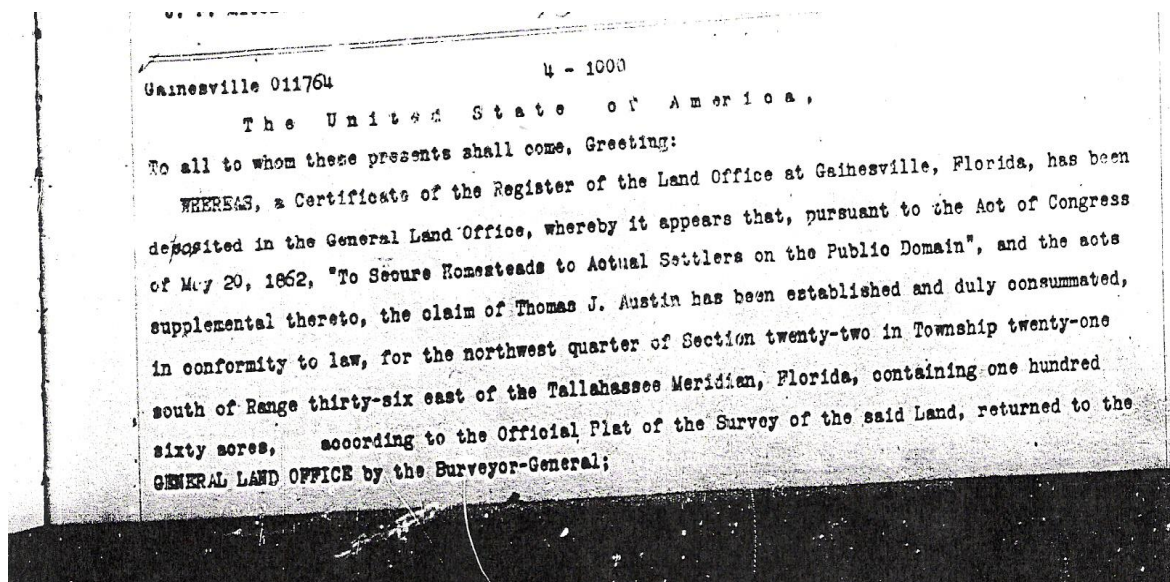


Ocean front lots could be purchased for \$20 an acre on what is today Cocoa Beach. But the beach towns grew over the decades to be more valuable and luxurious than there mainland counter parts – Cocoa, Cocoa Beach, Daytona, Daytona Beach, Miami, Miami Beach, West Palm, West Palm Beach. Yes, there once was a Titusville and a Titusville Beach, but Titusville Beach was purchased by NASA in the early 1960s just as Wilson was. Now they exist only in the memories of families that once lived there.

The Indian River (which is actually a lagoon) was filled with fish, shrimp and other wild life in 1912. It was a natural paradise. Locals could fill 50 to 60 barrels a day of shrimp and sell it for \$1 a barrel. In certain seasons, there were so many ducks there was barely space for any more to land, from shore to shore, along the mile wide Indian River - nothing but ducks. There was no electricity on the island, no coal for stoves for heat in the winter. But there was plenty of old timber – pine trees.

In 1912 there was an invasion of homesteaders, from nearly all 50 states into north Merritt Island after it was declared open for homesteading. Some locals from Titusville and Cocoa also homesteaded property on the island. Homesteaders were not wealthy people, especially in Florida. They were rugged people, willing to work the land, and make something out of nothing. My great grandfather, Thomas Jefferson Austin filed claim acquiring 160 acres, as did my grandfather, Guy Austin. Together, they lay claim to a total of 320 prime acres. The family story says they had a cousin in congress, and they had a heads up that the land was being opened up to homesteading. Also, they bought up all the boats in the area, to make it difficult for other homesteaders. Whatever they did, they got in early, because their homestead claims were right at the intersection of two roads – a north/south bound road which would become A1A connecting New Smyrna to Cocoa, and what would become FL 401, connecting Titusville to Titusville Beach.

I did research at the Titusville court house, and copied proof that Thomas Jefferson Austin, and Guy Austin filed, and were granted, homestead claims totaling 320 acres on Merritt Island.



## Record of Homestead Grant of 160 Acres to Thomas Jefferson Austin

Some of the homesteaders opened fishing and hunting lodges, such as the Briggs family establishing the “Happy Creek” fish camp, just south of Wilson. (see: *Memories of Merritt Island Birthplace of Kennedy Space Center* by Gail Briggs Nolen”). Others established citrus groves and made a living shipping fruit north. My family, from Illinois, took a different path, and decided they would create a town, and sell lots to people back home in the mid west. Hence, Wilson was destined to become the largest town on North Merritt Island. Wilson is the only town that has a road sign today. It also has an historic trail, called “Hammock Trail” that is accessible off FL 402, just east of Titusville.

They figured if their town had a post office, it would encourage settlers to buy property in Wilson. They petitioned the federal government, saying they would name the town Wilson, after Woodrow Wilson, if they granted them a post office. They got the post office, and the town was named Wilson. Proof of the Wilson Post Office can be found in the picture section of this book. There are canceled post marks of Wilson. However, there is a competing family story that says the town was named after “Aunt Wilson”.

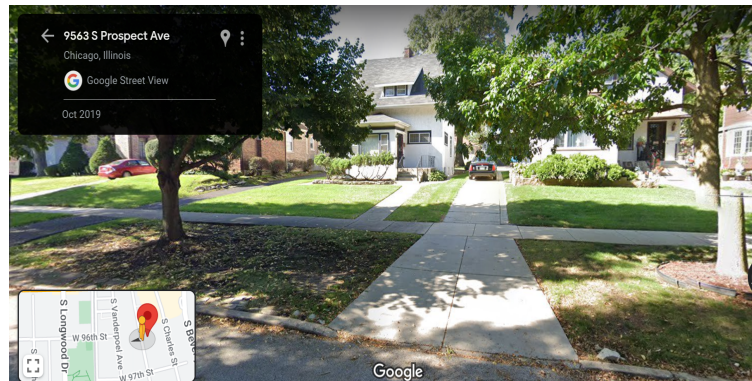
Selling lots alone would not bring in much wealth. So they opened, and operated, a store in Wilson. Perhaps they also helped, and profited in the construction of houses, although there are no family stories that support this. They did have electrical skills. They previously went to Washington and successfully lobbied to have their own telephone company – in southern Illinois (Carbondale, where I went to college!). They went up against Bell Telephone monopoly, and won. Uncle Ken grew up to become a professional electrician in Chicago.

My family left Wilson in 1916 and moved to Chicago. Perhaps it was the mosquitoes or the heat without air conditioning. But most likely it was the break up of my grandfather, and his wife Maude, explained further in chapter 5. Wilson grew over the years. “A school was built there, which became the meeting place for people of North Merritt Island. They voted, had dances, suppers, and met to discuss civic issues during the 1920s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. In the early 1950s, the North Merritt Island Community Building was erected (in Wilson).”\*

*(\*source: Memories of Merritt Island, Birthplace of Kennedy Space Center by Gail Briggs Nolen, page 84, Library of Congress Number: 2004107068 ISBN 0-9753023-1-0)*

I was told that the profits from Wilson, were exchanged for property in West Palm Beach FL. After Great Grandfather Thomas Jefferson Austin, and grandfather Guy Austin died, my grandmother, Esther Austin had to let that property go for past due property taxes, which she could not afford. For all we know, it was the property at Mara Lago! Regardless, it would be worth a fortune today, if she could have held on to it.

Guy Austin served in the Philippine – America war between 1889 and 1902, where he was one of many to contract malaria. While he survived the disease, it is believed it effected his health through out his life. He passed away peacefully at his home (9563 Prospect Ave, Chicago IL) on Thursday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the same day President Roosevelt died. After leaving Wilson for Chicago, he was known for his show place “Victory Garden” and for his generosity during difficult times.



I was so happy to be able to tell my mother I finally found the lost town of Wilson. She was proud to think the town her father and grandfather founded was indeed reality, not a family myth. Although 320 acres is a sizable property, it is not quite in sync with the tales a father told his children about “owning an island” in Florida. I imagine my grandfather, telling tall tales to his children about his glory years in the Florida wilderness. Such is the case in a fathers story. While owning the whole of Merritt Island was an exaggeration, there was truth to it as well. The stories of snakes, wild boar and alligators were certainly true.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Romance, Family Beginnings**

This chapter provides a guide to the people found in the picture section of this book.

It is uncertain exactly when Thomas and Guy Austin moved from Carbondale IL, to Florida. Homesteading opened up in 1912. It is reported they had an early heads up from a cousin in congress. They may have arrived in late 1911. It must have been early, because Kenneth Austin, son of Guy and Maude was born September 28, 1912. Maude Blackwell came from a Florida family, living in West Palm. It may be that the Austins spent time in West Palm, before homesteading in North Merritt Island. That is probably where Guy met, and fell in love with, Maude. Maude then joined the Austin family, and became a homesteader too.

Kenneth's nick name was Doris as a child.



I do not have dates or definitive pictures for Guy/Maude marriage, or their divorce. I once asked my mother how Guy got “custody” of Kenneth. She smirked and said “because grandpa (Thomas Jefferson Austin) was the judge”. Families in those days did not speak openly about such things.

The great Florida land bust did not start until the 1920s, and some of the legal paper work for Wilson is dated 1919. However, mom's stories say the Austin family left Florida in 1916, and moved to Chicago. They could have continued to have holdings in Wilson after moving. And Esther said she had to let properties go in West Palm for back taxes. The Austin's were connected to the Blackwell's who lived in West Palm.

I believe Maude came to Chicago at the same time as the Austin family, she may have still been with Guy. She certainly wanted to be with her son, Kenneth. I have vague memories of Kenneth meeting with his mother, Maude in Chicago. But of course, that would be a delicate matter for Esther.

Guy married Esther (Hollister) Austin May 12, 1923.

Gladys is Guy's younger sister. Not certain how much she was involved with the homestead town of Wilson, but she is in some of the photographs. A story from mom says she carried a gun to protect herself from snakes. If Gladys stayed in Wilson, she probably would have lived with her father, Thomas. Most of the pictures are of Guy's homestead.

Jean and Joan are daughters of Kenneth and Pat Austin. Joan is the source of the photos in my book.

There are also many pictures of Guy's time in the military. This would have been before they went to Florida. Guy was in the Philippine – American war 1889 – 1902.